

How can we do without criminalizing travel (to Syria) or ideology? – change our CVE-paradigm, and bring security and prevention policy together

(Harald Weilnböck, RAN Derad, CI Berlin)

Don't criminalize travel to Syria or other places – and don't criminalize any ideology

First of all, there are very hard security reasons why we should not criminalize travel to any war zone. Because criminalizing travel does not increase our security here at home as policies often suggest. In fact, criminalizing travel decreases our security! It creates a threat. Why is this?

If we impose sanctions on travel, this will keep young people who went to Syria from escaping the Islamic State – and return home (and those returnees who have ill intentions will find illegal ways to come back anyhow). This strengthens the IS it does not weaken it.

Even more importantly, criminalizing travel (and often also ideology) keeps family and friends from seeking help from authorities and social services when a young person seems to be at the verge of traveling to a war zone. Since they do not easily want to report on their loved ones and make them subject to law enforcement (already seeking help in such matters is very difficult psychologically anyhow).

Sanctioning is already threatening our security before any travel has begun. If legislation decides to withdraw passports from individuals about whom it has gathered the information that s/he wants to travel to a war zone, then this will cause immediate threats to our security. Why? – simply because withdrawing passports will make certain groups of our young citizens very angry and may trigger them to commit violent acts.

But aside of these hard security reasons, there are even more principle reasons and systemic risks why we should not criminalize travel (or ideology): Because criminalization destroys the foundations of good prevention work.

First-line practitioners of prevent work have always known and said this: If you want to be able to do good practice in preventing VE and foreign fighters *you must not criminalize travel to Syria*, as you must not criminalize any travel anywhere (e.g. Ukraine). Being a free and human rights based society, we must respect people's freedom. If we don't do that, good practice *cannot be done*. By the same token, *you must not criminalize ideologies (!)* – because, once again, if you do that, good practice disengagement *cannot be done*.

Why is this ? - three reasons:

Firstly, the field practitioners who do this very demanding work, need to be maximally trustworthy – and have integrity; not only personal integrity but also systemic integrity – this means: the system and the society which they stand for, is trustworthy.

This is so important because we need to reach out to young people who feel very alienated and are highly distrustful. And the process in which we have to engage them, is very challenging. It requires trust, personal commitment, maximum honesty, talk on sensitive issues of violence, victimization, gender, and confrontation of deep-rooted believes etc. This is not easy for anyone – hence, maximal integrity is paramount.

Needless to say, if a society criminalizes ideologies and travel to certain places, this society is lacking integrity and respect - and recognition of human rights. Hence, our young people will not trust us as practitioners of this society; they will look at us and say: “They try to brain-washers – they are brain-washers of a corrupt system”.

The second reason is about making sense vs. nonsense. Criminalizing subjects around ideology has always been widely ineffective – even counterproductive. It has further radicalized our client group instead of winning them back.

Plus, most of our young people know this. They look at this and say “are they stupid, or what?” ...And they say: “That is nonsense!” And our clients are very

tough on nonsense! If you don't make sense, they will definitely not engage with you.

The third reason: Often, these sanctions are not really made to solve problems. Often they are made to play up to certain constituencies – be this political parties and their electorates, be this the media and their customer groups. Our know that.

So, in total, looking at the criminalization, our young people say: Firstly, they don't respect us/ this is not human rights. Secondly, this is stupid/ makes no sense. Thirdly, this is dishonest and selfish.

Hence, they will not engaged with us.

Criminalizing travel lowers security and does not increase it:

However, there are also very hard security reasons why we should not criminalize. Because criminalizing travel does not increase our security here at home as policies often suggest. In fact, criminalizing travel decreases our security! It creates a threat. Why is this?

If we impose sanctions on travel, this will keep young people who went to Syria from escaping the Islamic State – and return home (and those returnees who have ill intentions will find illegal ways to come back anyhow). This strengthens the IS it does not weaken it.

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Does this all mean that we don't want to keep young citizens from traveling to war zones and become warriors? No, we want to keep them. But criminalization is not the answer.

How to avoid these mistakes (how to not do nonsense)? How to make sense? – this leads to the second challenge statement:

2. Change our security paradigm fundamentally

We need to change our security paradigm fundamentally: Practitioners from security and from prevent need to work together intensely. Thus, security/legislation, law enforcement, and intelligence on the one hand and prevent practitioners in social work, schools, mental health etc. on the other have to build *tandems*/ small practice units. These then get maximal support, do exemplary work – and also practice research; and they feed back to administration. These units would then be given a maximum of political attention. Policy makers, even politicians would be obliged to liaise with them regularly. And they would in some way need to be answerable to them – in other words, implement the recommendations they give.

Hence, security and prevent practitioners, both from the field, bottom-up, will together define our security policies. For more detail on this see:

“Why are we still messing it up? A new Marshall Plan for preventing violent extremism – youth work, gender, mental health” (here on this website).

If you find this unsettling and daring: Just go to Aarhus in Denmark, in part also Finland – they have this in place. Which is why they don't criminalize travel to Syria. Look at how they do it, at their success rates, and take it from there.