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[Jihadism and violence](#)

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[Religious freedom](#)

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[Newsletter](#)

[Research Projects](#)

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[Articles](#) > [Jihadism and violence](#) > [2017](#) > [Europe and Jihadism: is it Possible to "De-Radicalize"?](#)

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Europe and Jihadism: is it Possible to “De-Radicalize”?

Journey into two French prisons, where an experimental program pushed young inmates to “imagine themselves” differently

[Bartolomeo Conti](#) | 27 January 2017



An Imam and a prisoner pray together in the Osny correctional facility. Cerdit: Risposte Laïque

In February 2015, a few weeks after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the French prison administration launched an **experimental program** with a double objective: **to update the tools for the identification of “radicalized” inmates and to produce a program that would accompany them in view of their reintegration into society.** The research-action, carried out by the *Dialogues Citoyens* association in the

Osny and Fleury-Merogis correctional facilities, was carried out in a very tense atmosphere, where **prisons was pointed to by many as the privileged place for radicalization.** In fact, many of those involved in the attacks that shocked France had done some time in prison, from **Mohammed Merah** to **Amedy Coulibaly**, from **Chérif Khouachi** to **Mehdi Nemmouche**. And the same goes for those involved in the later attacks in France as well as in Germany. The research-action was called to answer two questions: **how to tell if an individual is “radicalized”,** i.e. dangerous because able to exercise violence in the name of an ideology? And how to embark on a path of rehabilitation or reintegration into society? And within these two questions lies a third one that gives the measure of the challenge that European societies are faced with: **is it possible to “de-radicalize”?**

To answer such questions, in both prisons they performed a diagnosis of the functionality of the correctional facility, life in detention, relations between detainees and prison staff and the methods used by the staff to identify Islamist radicalization. This first phase highlighted **the absence of a clear definition of “radicalization”,** with the result that the perception of the phenomenon is varied and often individualized. A feeling of inadequacy, sometimes accompanied by an anxiety-provoking perception, takes possession of the prison staff, who often end up seeing radicalization even where there is none. As emerged during the research-action, this is often confused with the orthodox/fundamentalist religious practice, with political discourse or the “simple” provocation towards the penitentiary institution, with the consequence of an increase in the level of stigmatization towards the prison’s Islamic population, whose members feel **“unfairly discriminated against”, a factor that seems to be a source of radicalization.** The diagnosis has therefore highlighted the need to begin with a redefinition of the basic concepts and a “deconstruction” of the existing instruments, not only harbingers of the mix between religious practice and radicalization, but also ineffective and obsolete. **How to understand, then, when an individual is in the process of radicalization?**

The selection, the prolonged interviews and the program that accompanies inmates suspected of being radicalized or in the process of radicalization, have revealed the need of young prisoners to verbalize their **feeling of injustice, exclusion and anger generally at the origin of their adherence to a discourse that breaks away from institutions and society.** This discourse goes beyond the Islamist radicalization phenomenon: it is also widespread in places of marginalization, starting with the French banlieue. **The inmates’ word is therefore the starting point,** as it allows for a deeper insight into the personal journey of every incarcerated individual, through an exchange of information between the different players in the prison, and a more direct relationship with the prisoner himself. The relationship based on verbal exchange turned out to be not only a conducive tool to see if an individual is radicalized or in the process of radicalization, but also a way to prevent radicalization: it is only through words that a suspected

radicalization can be verified, disarmed or fought. It is precisely the lack of dialogue between the institution and the prisoners that strengthens the feeling of injustice for certain inmates, which may be limited to the perception of being discriminated against up the point of reaching a “paranoid” attitude of being the subject of a conspiracy.

When do the “**anti-republican**” or “**anti-institutional**” talks, based on preconceptions or ideological certainties, become an indicator of radicalization? The research-action showed that such speeches alone are not enough to identify an extremist. They become an **indicator of radicalization** when the inmate shows other signs of crisis: **the antecedents of violence, the isolation or closure, a violent attitude during detention, a fractured personal journey, the “unbearable” if not obsessive feeling of injustice, psychological problems, a sense of individual and / or collective persecution, a sudden change in religious and dietary habits and interpersonal relationships.** It is in order to assess how these signs of crisis are combined, but also to understand the subjective needs or fragilities, that the need to establish a relationship of exchange and dialogue with each inmate emerges.

As part of the research-action, they experimented with an accompanying program with the double objective of **preventing the risk of radicalization** in prisons as well as **creating tools** for the integration of the individual in the social space. Fifty inmates, with different profiles and of which only some had been accused of terrorism, participated in four programs created by the two prisons. Each program, called “*engagements citoyens*”, alternated individualized work with collective sessions, attended by a wide variety of subjects inside and outside the detention (guards, prison management officers, ex-inmates, scholars, religious leaders, people engaged in social and political life...). During the group sessions they dealt with issues related to the experience of the inmates: life in prison, social and political exclusion, Islamophobia and racism, conflicts in the world, ISIS and Syria, but also more personal issues, such as one’s identity, relationship with the family or individual paths and professional projects. The program was aimed primarily at enabling participants to start a de-stigmatization process by allowing them to express their representations of life in society. Once the word was “freed”, the second phase consisted in accompanying participants to “re-elaborate” it through the comparison with the other, the others, to then return finally on personal path for everyone, in terms of family and work. The goal was to push them to question their individual trajectory, as well as their position in relation to society, their relationship with violence, with the perspective of bringing out a new construction of the self, but also to find new ways to challenge social norms.

Throughout the program, we witnessed an important evolution, both individual and collective. In fact, if during the first sessions the exchanges between participants, external parties and mediators were marked by a certain verbal virulence and negative behaviors, such attitudes gradually decreases and eventually disappeared. **There was an atmosphere of respect especially during the later sessions.** It is in this last phase of the program that the Manichaeic view, sometimes filled with victim complex and conspiracy theories, was dropped to make room for a work on individual trajectories, which allowed the participants to question themselves also about several methods of articulating personal experiences with the commitment and political and / or religious practice. This evolution of speech and position for the inmates was made possible by three distinct processes, which are structured differently according to different profiles.

For a significant number of young people who participated, particularly those who feel marginalized and stigmatized because of their social origin, whether ethnic or religious, contemporary society is characterized by a destructive and destabilizing disorder. It is in the “desperate” attempt to respond to this disorder, which is manifested through the weakness of traditional institutions, families and schools, and through the loss of authority of family or community figures with the function of establishing the line between right and wrong, lawful and unlawful, legal and illegal, that these young “authority orphans” are seeking in a simplified view of Islam a way that allows them to eliminate their doubts, to reduce the (destabilizing) chance of choice, to confine freedom to “divine” framework defined by indisputable, and therefore reassuring, rules. **The first re-subjectivation tool can therefore be described as the reintroduction of the doubt in the weak fortress of their beliefs.** Questioning their own individual path has allowed, in particular for young people without religious training or political commitment, to get rid of “absolute” and preconceived answers.

The fact that the word was circulating freely and that no counter-discourse was proposed or imposed was appreciated by the participants, who “discovered” an unusual and unexpected space of expression, allowing them to discover the benefits of confrontation and dialogue. In particular it is for those inmates with religious and more solid political bases that the opening of a dialogue with the prison’s institution on topics such as life in prison, the relationship between inmates and guards, and the respect for Muslim religious practices, is at origin of an attitude gradually less confrontational and more open to rational comparison, previously considered unnecessary and ineffective.

The fracturing speech takes the form of a narrative in which the subjective, political and religious explanations overlap or even merge. For most of the participants, the identification of their “excluded and refused” self to an Islam that is “attacked on all sides” and to Muslims who are “stigmatized and prevented from living according to their religion” or “are suffering under the bombs”, is the axis around which their victim discourse takes form. By inscribing the self in the political-religious field, **these young people “politicize” the traumas that have marked their lives.** The identification of the self at a collective level allows them to avoid facing their difficulties, even their personal failure and its causes, while the position of the victim becomes the explanatory framework of such failure, which allows them not to take responsibility. Questioning their individual path has replaced the certainties of a collective rhetoric built around victimization and conspiracy.

The limited number of individuals involved in this research-action and the relative homogeneity of their profiles do not allow us to extend the results to the whole of radicalization phenomenon, which is characterized by a huge variety of profiles and experiences. However, the methodological choice of dealing with the issues starting from the player’s word has allowed for the emergence of tools that can help develop a new narrative of the self that reduces, or even eliminates, the space given to violence. The reintroduction of the doubt, the separation between subjective and collective, or the legitimacy of the young prisoners’ word not only revealed the different modes of articulation among the subjective, religious and political dimensions, but also showed certain methods and tools for the reintegration of these young people in the social sphere. **In particular, the abandonment of ideological certainties and the opening of a space of uncertainty have led the way to the fragile “pleasure” to imagine oneself differently.**