



# A BETTER WAY TO KEEP KIDS FROM JOINING ISIS: TALK TO THEM

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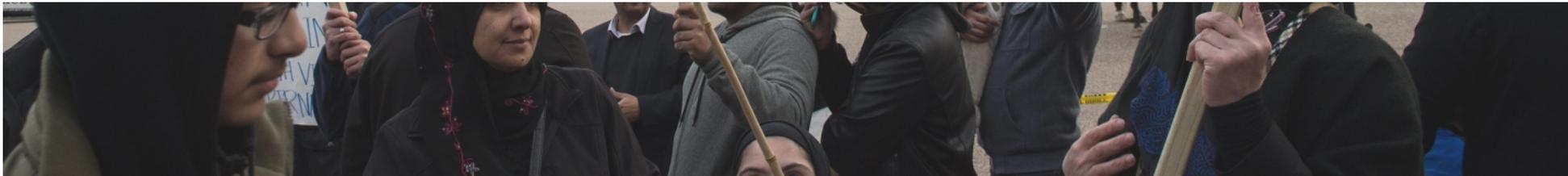


Photo: Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images

**IN 2015, WHILE** visiting Australia for a speaking engagement, Navaid Aziz was confronted by a young man who expressed his desire to join the Islamic State militant group. “He was saying he wanted to join the caliphate and similar sorts of rhetoric,” recalls Aziz, a youth counselor and Muslim religious scholar based in Canada. “It seemed like a lot of people had been brushing him off as a punk kid, but I set aside a few hours each day that I was there to listen to what he was saying and give my own feedback.”

A year later, the young man tracked Aziz down on Facebook. “I honestly didn’t know what had happened with him and thought that anything was possible,” Aziz says. In his message, the young man thanked Aziz for giving him guidance while he was in Australia. “He told me that if I hadn’t taken the time to speak with him then and challenge the things he was thinking, he might’ve ended up leaving home to join ISIS.”

This encounter between a young man and Aziz, a respected figure in his community who made time for him, potentially helped stop another young person from joining an extremist group. It also highlights the promise of self-directed, grassroots efforts against violent groups at a time when Western governments are spending millions on controversial, often invasive “countering violent extremism” programs.

# In his 2014 address to the U.N. General Assembly, President Obama stressed the need for world leaders to defeat “extremist ideologies” in their own countries.



Navaid Aziz. Photo: ALMaghrib.com

Since then, government coffers in the United States and elsewhere have opened up to fund counterextremism programs. The Obama administration has requested \$69 million in funding for countering violent extremism (CVE) programs at the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice, according to a 2017 budget [submission](#) for one of the offices receiving the funds. And the White House has [described](#) CVE efforts as an “administration priority” for its overall 2017 budget.

The U.S. government has long been engaged in promoting CVE, from funding “[moderate Islamic rap](#)” to creating [Twitter](#) accounts and “[fancy memes](#)” to battle the influence of radicals online. This is in addition to the millions also being spent around the world by

private organizations.

But despite the massive outlays of cash, the effectiveness of such programs is difficult to quantify. Many critics of CVE programs have blamed them for **antagonizing** the communities they are supposed to be doing outreach with, either by using counterextremism as a cover for surveillance, or by anointing “religious reformers” or “former extremists” as figureheads, despite the fact that such individuals are often widely loathed among Muslim communities.

“The issue is that many of these initiatives are spearheaded by individuals who have little experience or credibility with Muslim communities, and are thus unlikely to provide effective counternarratives for those at risk,” says Alexander Corbeil, a specialist on counterextremism at the security research firm SecDev. “I’m doubtful any mass campaign would have an impact on young people at risk of extremism. Such individuals need to be engaged with one on one to understand their grievances and reasoning. That’s the most effective way to prevent people from going down a path to radicalism, but the success of any such effort also requires the input and close involvement of people in Muslim communities.”

**Aziz’s own grassroots work offers a potential blueprint for effectively preventing homegrown extremism.**

For him, steering young people away from radical groups is not a government directive but something that he sees as a civic, moral, and religious duty. A youth counselor to young people living in Calgary, Alberta, he runs a mentorship group with his wife for young people in their local community. “Our focus is on keeping kids safe from the dangers that exist out there, whether they be gangs, drugs, or other forms of violence,” Aziz says. “Protecting them from radicalism is a natural extension of that.”

As part of the mentorship program, which runs out of a local mosque where Aziz is an instructor, young people receive lessons on social justice and take part in community volunteer activities intended to provide a sense of purpose and responsibility. “We have study sessions where we focus on critical thinking and teaching young people the consequences of their actions. We also look at the lives of people in the past who confronted situations of injustice without resorting to violence, like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and historical figures from Islam,” he says. “The purpose of all this is to show young people they are part of something greater than themselves. We do volunteer work in the broader community, particularly with senior citizens, and the kids start feeling like their lives are part of something big and meaningful.”

The Calgary community that Aziz serves has come under scrutiny after a number of its young men – seven are named in a U.S. Military Academy [report](#) – traveled abroad to join the Islamic State. [Some](#) later appeared in propaganda videos for the group. Others are now believed to be [dead](#). In 2014, the city’s police chief [raised concerns](#) that support for extremism was growing among young people, in part due to the deteriorating political

situation in the Middle East.

Aziz says that despite a few sensational cases, in his experience, support for radicalism exists only among a fringe minority. But for those who are at risk for radicalization, political events are a prime driver. “We shoot ourselves in the foot when we try and look for single root causes for social phenomena like this, but the elephant in the room is always foreign policy. Nobody wants to address it, though in my experience, its the No. 1 reason that young people get angry,” Aziz says. “Muslim communities have existed in Western countries for a very long time, but the issue of homegrown terrorism only arose over the past decade with the Iraq War and this period of extended conflict in the Middle East.”

“There is injustice going on in the world, and unless you do something to mitigate those problems, you’ll always end up treating symptoms but not the disease,” Aziz says.

Top photo: Muslims hold a protest against ISIS outside the White House in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 6, 2015.

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