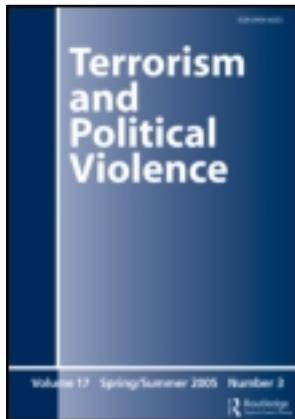


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Terrorism and Political Violence

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20>

### Suspect Communities—Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London

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Published online: 20 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Floris Vermeulen (2014) Suspect Communities—Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:2, 286-306, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2012.705254](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.705254)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.705254>

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# Suspect Communities—Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London

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*Throughout Europe, authorities have set up new policy measures and programs to curb homegrown violent extremists. This article describes local policy responses to violent Islamic extremism—and/or the mere threat of it—in the neighborhoods Oost in Amsterdam, Moabit and Soldiner Kiez in Berlin, and Tower Hamlets in London. Based on locally conducted fieldwork, the study compares and contrasts these neighborhoods' approaches and aims to make a first assessment of their effects. A major finding for all three cities is that authorities target the entire local Muslim community rather than a few select individuals. This can lead to the construction of suspect communities, an approach with possible paradoxical effects on targeting actual violent extremists. Suspect communities subsequently create stigmatization, exclusion, and possibly marginalization, which not only has negative consequences for involved groups, but may well produce a breeding ground for future violence. However, the author did not find that engagement with Islamic organizations or individuals was used to directly change the nature of local Muslim communities. Orthodox and non-violent extremist organizations and individuals in all three cities were potential partners for engagement, which probably lowers the chance of stigmatizing the suspect communities.*

**Keywords** Amsterdam, Berlin, engagement, homegrown, London, preventive policies, suspect communities

## Introduction

On the morning of November 2, 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was shot at close range in the middle of a busy street in Amsterdam's eastern city borough known as Oost. The perpetrator was Mohammed Bouyeri, a young Islamic extremist of Moroccan descent who was born and raised in Amsterdam. Bouyeri finished the act by stabbing Van Gogh in the chest with a knife that also served to pin a letter to his body. The letter contained an extensive death threat to MP and Muslim apostate Ayaan Hirsi Ali as well as two other politicians, the Dutch conservative party leader and the mayor of Amsterdam at the time. Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali

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together had made the movie *Submission*, which was broadcast on Dutch television the summer before. Many Muslims in the Netherlands, including Bouyeri, took the movie as an insult to Islam. Soon after Van Gogh's murder, it was reported that other politicians were on Bouyeri's "death list," among them, Ahmed Aboutaleb, then Amsterdam's alderman for diversity who was a practicing Muslim of Moroccan descent himself.<sup>1</sup> As scholars have observed, the Van Gogh assassination was intended to arouse fear in Amsterdam. Bouyeri made the murder as ghastly as possible so as to heighten its impact. The carefully planned street setting, use of a knife, his letter, and the white religious dress he wore all point to Bouyeri's keen sense of drama and audience<sup>2</sup>—the impact of which had significant effects on social life in Amsterdam indeed.<sup>3</sup> Bouyeri was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

In February 2008, a gallery in the Moabit immigrant neighborhood in Berlin ignited controversy by hosting an exhibition of Danish artworks organized around the theme of political and religious extremism. Depicting an image of the Kaaba Mosque, one of the paintings was entitled "Stupid stone." It provoked strong protest from the local Islamic community. A group of 15 young Muslim men from the neighborhood threatened violence should the contested piece not be taken down. The exhibition had to close temporarily, as the gallery owner could not guarantee safety of his employees. This decision fanned further controversy in the media. Local politicians from different parties took a firm stance that freedom of speech should be upheld in Berlin and that the exhibition should therefore reopen its doors. At the same time, a local imam endeavored to calm things down by visiting the protesting youngsters and their families. He told them that violent threats were an unacceptable response to the situation. Together with the imam, local authorities organized a series of discussion meetings on two topics: freedom of speech and religious beliefs. The exhibition reopened without further incident.<sup>4</sup>

On the morning of July 12, 2010, a religious education teacher was making his way to work in Tower Hamlets, an immigrant district in East London, when four violent Islamic extremists assaulted him. They used a knife, a metal rod, and a brick to fracture his skull and shatter his jaw, leaving him in the street unconscious. It was reported that the four men, all from East London, caused this harm because the teacher was instructing Muslim pupils at a London girls' school. Intelligence services secretly recorded one of the men, already under suspicion and surveillance for being a violent extremist, saying right after the attack: "He's [the teacher] mocking Islam and he's putting doubts in people's minds. How can somebody take a job to teach Islam when they're not even a Muslim themselves? This is the dog we want to hit, or strike, or kill." The four men received jail sentences ranging from five to eight years.<sup>5</sup>

The three incidents described above are events from the last decade involving violent Islamic extremists in Western Europe. Specifically, they are examples of so-called "homegrown terrorism" in which youngsters of immigrant background threaten, or actually use, violence for purported religious reasons. The term "homegrown terrorism" is problematic, though, because direct transnational links often play a crucial role in these acts.<sup>6</sup> But, most significantly, "homegrown" in the European context refers to marginalized immigrant communities of Muslim background. As argued in this article, authorities in the above-mentioned neighborhoods perceive the threat of violent extremism as coming from the entire Muslim immigrant communities rather than a select few individuals. By taking on the community level at large, authorities risk producing a mismatch in their policy target—violent

extremism—and its implementation, thus resulting in the construction of suspect communities. Hillyard<sup>7</sup> describes the construction of a suspect community as a policy framework in which an entire community is treated very differently from the rest of the population in law, policy, and police practices. Viewing a whole community as inherently suspicious can often have detrimental effects, resulting in increasingly intrusive, heavy-handed policy and policing techniques that stigmatize the entire community.

Throughout Europe, authorities have set up new policy measures and programs to curb homegrown violent extremists and prevent other second-generation immigrants from becoming violent extremists themselves. Authorities have first and foremost responded to this new threat by introducing new counterterrorism policies and extending the powers of the secret service and law enforcement. Security services detect suspected dangerous individuals and inhibit their actions, while the police arrest suspects and incarcerate them once legal permission is granted. Within these penal institutions, special measurements are being applied.<sup>8</sup> In some of Europe, public manifestations of Islamic radicalism are at times prohibited, and imams who preach dangerous ideologies are expelled from the country<sup>9</sup> (although it is important to note that specific practices among European countries differ).<sup>10</sup> Restrictions are also placed on institutions in which alleged Muslim radicals are seen to be carrying out suspicious activities, such as at Islamic bookstores, travel agencies, *halal* butchers, international call centers, and internet cafés. Finally, in an effort to better handle violent extremism, Europe has intensified its border controls.

As this article shows, European countries have also developed an intensive policy framework intended to prevent, primarily, second-generation immigrants of Muslim background from becoming violent extremists by engaging an area's entire immigrant community. Because implementation of these prevention programs is conducted at the neighborhood level, this article analyzes specific approaches pursued in the neighborhoods of Oost in Amsterdam, Moabit and Soldiner Kiez in Berlin, and Tower Hamlets in London. This article aims to compare the approaches' similarities and differences and, more importantly, to better understand them so as to come to a first assessment of their effectiveness. Understanding actual implementation of the policies at the local level is imperative. This constitutes the backbone of European policies against violent Islamic extremism and is highly under-studied, with most research on counterterrorism in Europe focusing on the national level. Moreover, it has significant implications for such policies' success (or lack thereof) as well for the people involved, specifically, local Muslim communities in Europe.

Lum et al.<sup>11</sup> found that only a very small percentage of studies on counterterrorism strategies are based on empirical research, which makes rigorous evaluation of the different strategies impossible. The present study—of just four different neighborhoods across three European capitals—is also too narrow in scope for a thoroughly rigorous evaluation. However, a first step is taken in this direction by proposing here a framework for studying Europe's local responses to violent Islamic extremism. Alongside the various policy responses' advantages and disadvantages, the present study discusses fieldwork that my colleagues and I have conducted to identify the policies in the first place. Our fieldwork consisted of interviews with state actors, politicians, civil servants (at the city and neighborhood levels as well as practitioners working in one of the local policy programs targeting violent Islamic extremism), board members of Islamic organizations, and other key figures in local

Muslim communities. We also analyzed national- and local-level documents describing policies against violent Islamic extremism. Through this research, we sought to learn what reaction local authorities had to the violent incidents described in this article's introduction.

Our interest was in how local authorities perceived and identified the threat of violent extremism in their district or neighborhood. Specifically, we looked at the way they targeted the threat and the extent to which they identified violent extremism as coming from local orthodox and/or extremist Islamic organizations. Authorities often—incorrectly—perceive ethnic and religious immigrant organizations to be representative of the larger ethnic or religious community. The information about the role of local organization was used as an indicator of the extent to which local authorities have collectivized enemy conceptualizations of Muslims in their city.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, we sought to understand the extent to which the three cities' respective policies have indeed produced suspect communities through implementing policies against violent Islamic extremism and its consequent possible stigmatization. But before describing the city policy practices, it is useful to outline the context in which local authorities in European cities work.

### Policy Definitions of Violent Extremism

Whether or not a particular group is considered extremist and thus dangerous depends on who does the evaluation. Extremism is a relational concept, as Malik states:

It follows that the norm against which the ideas, values or conduct of the group are being compared is critical to an analysis of whether or not they are 'extremist'. In Western states the obvious comparator is provided by the principles of liberal democracy.<sup>13</sup>

A crucial distinction is the extent to which authorities distinguish between violent and non-violent forms. Malik<sup>14</sup> states that the term "extremist" increasingly includes non-violent Muslim groups who support certain ideas concerning political organization (e.g., notion of the caliphate) or facets of social and/or personal life deemed incompatible with liberal democracy (e.g., gender equality norms). Bartlett and Miller<sup>15</sup> find that there is a subtle but crucial difference between violent and non-violent forms of Islamic extremism. They argue that to become a "homegrown" violent extremist does not necessarily, or wholly, encompass a religious, intellectual, or rational decision. Briggs<sup>16</sup> goes so far as to state that there is no empirical evidence of a causal link between extremism and violent extremism. Recognizing the distinction between political engagement—what Briggs calls healthy radicalism (community anger and frustration, protest, actions, and demonstrations)—and violent extremism (terrorism and use of violence) is crucial for authorities who hope to curb violent extremism.

On the other hand, Vidino<sup>17</sup> argues that the true nature of non-violent Islamic extremism is at the heart of how to "identify the enemy." He finds that European authorities have failed to do just this, precisely failing to acknowledge a real difference between violent and non-violent forms of Islamic extremism. Vidino identifies three types of extremism: a) jihadists (actual terrorists); b) non-violent extremist groups favoring a complete rejection of Western values and a proclaimed desire to

establish an Islamic state worldwide (though they are not necessarily violent in Western Europe itself); c) orthodox political Islamic organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Pakistani Jama'at-e Islami, and the Turkish Millî Görüş. According to Vidino, this last group, comprising legal political Islamic organizations, have consciously decided to avoid unnecessary confrontation with European states, though they ultimately share the same goal as the first two groups: fundamental social and political changes in the West in keeping with their religious ideas. According to Vidino, these orthodox political Islamic movements have opted for a flexible policy of engagement with the European establishment in order to improve their own status and achieve their political goals.

Broadening their definition of the “real enemy,” local authorities face the major challenge of also targeting non-violent extremist or orthodox organizations. It proves difficult to distinguish real extremists from religious groups who choose to separate themselves from mainstream society merely because they are orthodox in a religious sense.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, religious orthodox groups may be illiberal, though still entirely inward-looking, with no political goals or interest in changing the existing political order. Their main concern is to sustain a way of life for the group's own members and to reproduce their culture or faith for future generations. Such groups only become politically active when they are denied this way of life, rather than starting out with any political goals or interest in joining the liberal public sphere.<sup>19</sup> It may well be that if these groups are forced to become politically active—for instance, because they get categorized as extremists by authorities and consequently find it difficult to maintain their old way of life—they do indeed become extremist in a political sense, but not violent by default.

### **Homegrown Violent Extremism: Debates About Immigrants, Democracy, and Belonging**

“Homegrown” as a concept emerged after the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005.<sup>20</sup> The multiple attacks were carried out by young men born and raised in the United Kingdom, presumably without any outside aid or assistance. Crone and Harrow<sup>21</sup> unpack the concept of “homegrown” violent extremists by distinguishing between two dimensions: belonging to the West and being autonomous from violent groups abroad. The first dimension is especially relevant for studying local authorities' responses to violent extremism. What worried European policymakers more than any issue of autonomy—which in many cases, such as 7/7, proves incorrect any-way<sup>22</sup>—was the fact that such extremists used violence against their fellow citizens. Authorities identified this as a detachment from the West, in general, and as having little or no sense of emotional belonging to their nation-state, in particular. However, as citizens of the UK, such “homegrown” extremists are, in formal terms, completely attached to their respective nation-states, often unlike their parents. Adding to policymakers' shock is the fact that they were socialized in Western school systems, many being relatively highly educated. These background circumstances have apparently not led to their adherence to core values particular to the British, German, or Dutch liberal democratic systems.

Many policy analyses took as their next step a shift in focus from the individuals themselves to the community from which they seemed to originate. Briggs<sup>23</sup> states that events like 7/7 caused authorities to realize the complex web of radicalized people within local Muslim communities and, moreover, that the communities should

be given a central role in addressing the problem. The rationale was that communities produce detached violent homegrown individuals because the communities themselves are detached. Briggs gives two reasons for this. First, most of these local Muslim communities comprise poorly educated economic immigrants, who from a social-economic perspective are thus marginalized and disadvantaged. Second and often deemed more important, the detachment falls under wider discussions about Islam's incompatibility with a liberal democratic system.

The incompatibility seems to revolve around three elements. First, there is a perceived clash of Islamic values and Western liberal values. Issues such as separation of state and church, freedom of speech, and gender equality are all perceived as being fundamentally contradictory to the Islamic belief system. It is presumed by some Westerners that Muslim immigrant communities cannot adhere to the core values of a Western democracy. Second, as a result of its transnational character, Islam and its religious practices are seen as undermining the sovereignty of European nation-states.<sup>24</sup> In this interpretation, Islam is mainly seen as a system of transnational circuits between religious leaders and their followers, whereby followers belong to the *umma*—the imagined community of Muslims at large—rather than their respective nation-states. Third, Muslim immigrants are perceived as collective social and political participants. This style is considered out of sync with the West's more individualistic orientation, whereby individual actors participate more or less directly in society, independent from one or more collectivities.<sup>25</sup>

### **Engagement to Neutralize Extremist Threats: Value-Based and Means-Based Approaches**

As we have seen, what begins as a rather clear-cut policy question—preventing certain individuals from becoming violent—turns into a complex, multifaceted discussion about immigration, belonging, citizenship, and the position of Muslim communities in Western societies. How can authorities respond to the threat posed by violent extremists and the presumed communities they originate from? Miller<sup>26</sup> identifies several possible strategies, ranging from completely ignoring violent extremism to using violence to injure or kill violent extremists and their supporters. Between these two extremes are conciliation (including social reforms) and legal reform (expanding police powers and creating specific terror laws). Laurence<sup>27</sup> posits that European and American authorities often use the same conciliation strategy they use for other violent movements when faced with potentially violent minorities from underrepresented groups that threaten social peace and political stability—i.e., violent extremist groups. In these cases, governments pursue a broad institutional engaging of identified “moderates” in order to help defuse class conflict or racial and religious tensions. One such method has been creating extra-parliamentary institutions in which selected organizations are offered an exclusive role at administering specific practical tasks and negotiating with state officials. Laurence states that in addition to this technical role, a political behavioral agenda undergirds the institutional process: namely, to encourage moderate demands and traditional political participation. The advantages and privileges of institutional access for the selected organizations are balanced by a set of restrictions and obligations: having to behave responsibly and predictably while simultaneously refraining from giving in to non-negotiable, extremist demands. Laurence shows how European authorities in different countries have—at least at the national level—recently applied this strategy to

the perceived threat of Islam. The mechanism proves similar in different contexts: authorities look for engageable representatives from Muslim communities who will provide access in order to make the communities as a whole less orthodox, less extremist, and therefore less threatening. Akkerman et al.<sup>28</sup> argue that there are good reasons to distrust such forms of engagement from above. They believe that networks and associations involved in state-initiated policymaking will become dependent on state aid in order to function. The problem is not only that associations become vulnerable to shifts in public policy, but also that such networks become skewed excessively in the direction of the state.

Birt<sup>29</sup> contends that the UK's recent response to violent Islamic extremism at the national level revolves completely around the idea of engagement as per Laurence. In this state-initiated engagement, Birt identifies two different approaches, which are in keeping with the two different schools of thought on what undergirds the challenge of Muslim communities in the West. One thought identifies it as a religious problem (i.e., Islam is incompatible with Western values), while another labels it an immigrant problem (i.e., immigrants are marginalized in the West and their social position needs to be improved).

First, what Birt calls the “value-based” approach identifies violent extremism as a gross theological error of which both violent and non-violent extremists are guilty. Religious Islamic values and their incompatibility with Western values are central to this explanation of violent extremism. The state should therefore focus on changing extremists' religious ideologies and values—hence the term “value-based.” State-initiated engagement with the Muslim community should be implemented by engaging with moderate Islamic organizations to correct the extremists' theological error, in line with Laurence's belief that authorities try to change the nature of an ideological movement (in this case orthodox Islam). The policy aim is to strengthen moderate Islam *vis-à-vis* more orthodox or radical Islamic movements in order to change the overall nature of Islam in Europe and eventually make it more compatible with Western norms and values. This approach is seen as a form of supporting selected organizations that will eventually shape the character of the entire community.

Second, what Birt<sup>30</sup> terms the “means-based” approach sees violent Islamic extremism largely as a socio-political movement in which only individual violent extremists are complicit. Personal social, emotional, and psychological factors contribute to young men's attraction to joining violent Islamic extremist groups. Radicalization is not automatically seen as a religious process, contrary thus to Laurence's analysis. In practice, the means-based approach opts for strong engagement with organizations and individuals who will prove to have the most credibility with extremists. Most salient here is how effective such individuals' style of personal engagement is and, specifically, their scholarly, religious, or personal credibility and willingness to cooperate on the basis of shared interests—not shared values. The results emerging from collaboration between authorities and Islamic organizations are what are most at stake here, not that the parties agree on all norms and values, nor that parties be swayed to change their stances on certain moral or religious issues.

Unsurprisingly, each school of thought criticizes the other. The value-based approach easily lends itself to political divisiveness by causing ideological competition within the Islamic community. It promotes extreme Muslims as official partners, while its wide-lensed view can alienate “ordinary” Muslims who are necessarily targeted for also practicing a religion that is seen as the cause of violent extremism.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, the means-based approach gets accused of political naïveté, for overlooking crucial ideological and religious factors that also explain violent extremism. It concentrates on the behavior—not the dogma—of extremists, thus leaving Islamic ideology untouched. Furthermore, it legitimates fundamentalist, reactionary, or quasi-extremist elements at the expense of core values and social solidarity. Ultimately, engaging with the government only strengthens the violent Islamic extremist movement. According to critics of the means-based approach, engagement as such allows the movement to augment its status within the Muslim community and, hence, the ability to radicalize it.<sup>32</sup>

The following section describes how London, Berlin, and Amsterdam carry out policy practices in this field. We have selected these cities because they represent the capitals of three European countries that face the threat of homegrown violent extremism and have formulated policies against this threat in different degrees. The UK and the Netherlands have formulated and implemented specific and intensive policy programs, whereas Germany is in the process of formulating such policies. The comparison between the cities may shed light on the effect of the national policy context on local policy practices. Each paragraph on one of the cities will start with a short overview of the policy context on the national level (if applicable).

We endeavor to show how local authorities perceive the threat of violent Islamic extremism in their city. In particular, we look at how they may target it; the extent to which they engage with the local Islamic community; whether they have collectivized enemy conceptualizations; and whether this has led to the creation of suspect communities. For this study, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews per city. We asked them about the threat of violent extremism in their particular district or neighborhood; the role orthodox and/or extremist Islamic organizations play in a perceived extremist threat and in consequent policy practices; and the local approach's effects. For our interviews, we selected the main policymakers responsible for policy at the district or neighborhood level, some practitioners implementing the policy, board members of local Islamic organizations participating in policy projects (if applicable), as well as board members of main local Islamic organizations not participating in any such projects. The interviews were conducted between October and November 2010 in London's Tower Hamlet; between April and August 2010 in Berlin; and in Amsterdam at the beginning of 2009 along with three additional interviews in April 2011 in order to take the latest policy developments at the time into account. The neighborhoods and/or districts were selected on the basis of our knowledge of the local field. We were interested in those neighborhoods and/or districts in which authorities actively targeted violent extremism by setting up specific programs, projects, or councils. However, we would like to emphasize that particular findings for a neighborhood and/or district should not be taken as representative of an entire city.<sup>33</sup>

### **London: Tower Hamlets**

More than any other European country, the UK is facing the biggest threat from “homegrown” Islamic violent extremism.<sup>34</sup> More people have been arrested for terrorism-related activities in the UK than elsewhere in Europe. Terrorist activities in the UK resulted in the imprisonment of 235 people between 2001 and 2009.<sup>35</sup> Sixty-nine percent of terrorism offences perpetrated in the UK were committed by

individuals holding British nationality. Most offenders, just under half (48%), lived in London,<sup>36</sup> indicating that the city's authorities are indeed facing a "homegrown" problem.

The policy framework known as CONTEST was developed at the national level in early 2003. Responding to violent extremism, the policy comprises four thematic strands: Pursue, Prevent, Protect, and Prepare. Most relevant for this article's look at engagement is the strategy known as "Prevent."

Official Prevent reports cite six core policy goals, illustrating a heavy emphasis on religion and Islamic communities throughout Britain. Prevent a) tries to challenge violent extremist ideology and support moderate voices, religious or otherwise; b) endeavors to disrupt those who promote violent extremism and the institutions where they are active; c) supports individuals who are being targeted and recruited in the service of violent extremism; d) increases the resilience of communities to violent extremism; e) addresses the grievances that ideologues are exploiting; and f) develops understanding, analysis and information, and strategic communications.

Prevent provides funds for localities, such as cities like Birmingham and Bradford, and boroughs within London like Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, and Haringey. The funding is intended for the building of strong communities that are confident in themselves, open to others, and resilient to violent extremism. Prevent also offers programs that oversee training for imams and teaching materials on British citizenship for use in Koran schools. The content of these projects, as well as decisions about which religious bodies authorities should even engage with, have given rise to accusations that the state is interfering in theological matters. Kundnani,<sup>37</sup> for instance, suggests that participation in such didactic matters suggests that religious texts are being interpreted to meet authorities' own aims. Many critics, including the Parliamentary Select Committee who reviewed the British policy in 2010, believe that the government's approach has excessively focused on theology as a factor behind violent extremism:

Regarding the Government's analysis of the factors which lead people to become involved in violent extremism, we conclude that there has been a pre-occupation with the theological basis of radicalisation, when the evidence seems to indicate that politics, policy and socio-economics may be more important factors in the process.<sup>38</sup>

When it comes to the definition of extremism (both violent and non-violent forms), the Prevent reports use liberal norms and values as the comparator against which to define extremism:

As a society we must defend and promote our shared and non-negotiable values: respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect for others and responsibility towards others. This is how we have isolated the far right. And it is now how we must stand up to terrorists and their supporters. Government needs to support individuals and organisations who uphold those values and to respond robustly when those values are transgressed. ... It is not acceptable for leadership organisations merely to pay lip service to tackling violent extremism. Government is giving priority, in its support and funding decisions, to those leadership organisations actively working to tackle violent extremism, supporting

community cohesion and speaking out for the vast majority who reject violence.<sup>39</sup>

At the national level, Prevent has produced a distinct value-based approach. Its objective is to change the nature of Muslim extremist communities in the UK by engaging with “moderate” and “mainstream” organizations, while supporting and sharing values brought forward by the government. One consequence is that Muslim communities become stigmatized and their integration process gets linked with security issues; individuals and groups expressing different norms and values are seen as suspect and potentially dangerous.<sup>40</sup>

Though using the same Prevent framework and funding, Tower Hamlets takes a different approach from the one that is implemented at the national level. As one of the city's 32 boroughs, located east of the City of London, Tower Hamlets has the largest proportion of Muslims of all boroughs in England and Wales. Muslims comprise 36.4% of the population. The borough has been involved in the Prevent program from the start. Since 2008, Tower Hamlets has funded a total of 28 Prevent projects, although three were pulled, thus leaving a total of 25 projects to be funded with £1,349,000.<sup>41</sup> Only the cities of Birmingham and Bradford have received more Prevent money than Tower Hamlets.<sup>42</sup>

Tower Hamlets' policy response to violent extremism has been characterized as one espousing broad objectives in the areas of social cohesion and crime in order to reduce inequality and remove the causes of anti-social behavior and violent extremism.<sup>43</sup> This seems to suggest that local authorities in Tower Hamlets believe violent extremism has an important social component needing to be tackled by the Prevent program. Some of the main programs reflect this belief by emphasizing employment and education. However, many also touch upon religious topics. Religious organizations, such as the East London Mosque, the Cordoba Foundation, and Masjid Al Huda Center, are involved in several such projects. Although local authorities have insisted that these rather conservative organizations can all be considered “mainstream,” the term “moderate” is not applicable. The objective for engaging with these Islamic organizations does not seem to reflect the nature of local Muslim communities in the borough. In fact, none of the organizations reported being directly instructed by authorities on the “correct” religious or political content to be propagated in their programs. Religious organizations did, however, provide details of their projects' religious content as part of their application for funding.

For instance, the Al-Hikma project at Al-Huda Mosque leads young people and imams in regular discussions about violence and extremism, and hosts a fortnightly lecture on an issue related to violent extremism by a Muslim scholar. The project also holds discussion groups for youth on religious and political issues, such as the meaning of jihadism, terrorism, and foreign policy. During our fieldwork, the mosque representative told us that the Islamic scholar delivering the fortnightly sermon decides on the content himself, without external input. The respondent also suggested through other comments that a certain openness was espoused in the youth project's discussions on foreign policy issues. In regard to the War in Iraq, he said, “You can't control what people say.” He also mentioned a recent residential trip funded by Prevent for 30 young people to learn about the UK's history and, in so doing, to foster a sense of British citizenship among participants. The respondent told us that British history education was requisite for receiving Prevent funding. Moreover, he agreed with the requirement, believing that promoting British

citizenship was important. He also told us that the mosque had consulted Muslim scholars before accepting the funding; their assessment that Prevent was not *haram* helped the community accept the mosque's involvement with the program. The representative said that although some community members still had reservations, once the program started, people were won over. He did not think Al-Huda Mosque was perceived by the community as a "Prevent mosque," *per se*. In his view, Prevent served as a means through which the mosque talked about the principles of Islam, and the program was not doing anything to convert its members.

Local authorities in Tower Hamlets engaged with some more orthodox organizations, although they did not, as explicitly self-stated, engage with what they considered non-violent extremist organizations. As the Tower Hamlet's Prevent manager stated:

We were kind of open enough to accommodate as many partners as possible, we didn't want to I think shut the door to anyone except for example the kind of extremist organizations such as al-Muhajiroun or Hizb-ut-Tahrir kind of organizations who ... you know ... everyone knows that the narratives they use are extremist narratives, which can lead people into radicalization and into violence in turn. So that was very, very clear; we made sure that none of those [funded] organizations are linked to any of those organizations, so the people who are delivering this are mainly mainstream voices that would represent the mainstream narrative of Islam.<sup>44</sup>

Non-violent extremist organizations could, however, participate at times in Prevent-funded programs in Tower Hamlets. The respondent from Al-Huda Mosque told us that the district authorities never had a problem with "controversial views" being raised in Prevent-sponsored discussions. Likewise, the assistant executive director of the East London Mosque reported that the borough allowed Hizb ut-Tahrir into discussions and debates as part of their Prevent-funded Muslim Youth Council project. He said that members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were included because:

... It was important for us to engage, I felt, with a variety of different organizations, different people who represented different viewpoints, because without taking on board what their views are of a particular issue, it was hard, I believe, for strategies to be able to respond to that.<sup>45</sup>

There is, however, one counter-example in this picture. The Cordoba Foundation received Prevent funding from Tower Hamlets Council to run series of conferences known as "Muslims Debating Society." Entitled "Has political participation failed British Muslims?," the third conference featured the chair of Hizb ut-Tahrir UK as a panelist. His inclusion in the event gave rise to concern in the council, who thus refused to give Cordoba agreed-upon funding for this particular conference. According to Cordoba's chief executive, this compelled the foundation to stop pursuing public money for any of its projects, and its engagement with Prevent came to an end. Cordoba complained that Prevent's withdrawal of support was damaging to free speech and trust between the government and the community.<sup>46</sup>

To reiterate, in Tower Hamlets, just as in other British areas where Prevent is implemented, the entire Muslim community is targeted. However, there is no sign

of state actors attempting to change the nature of the local Muslim communities. Orthodox and even extremist voices are included in these forms of engagement. In fact, the community as a whole seems to have large input in this process, which probably lowers the stigmatizing effect on this form of suspect community.

### **Berlin: Moabit and Soldiner Kiez**

Violent extremism is a serious issue in Berlin, and the threat not only comes from Muslim extremists, but also from left- and right-wing extremists. According to the Berliner Verfassungsschutz,<sup>47</sup> Berlin has an approximated 1,500 right-wing extremists, about half of whom are characterized as violent or willing to use violence. The number of left-wing extremists is higher, being estimated at 2,200 persons, about half of whom are also characterized as violent. In terms of numbers and level of violence, the threat from Islamic violent extremists is significantly lower than from other violent extremist movements. The Verfassungsschutz estimates that there are about 450 violent Islamic extremists in Berlin, most of them affiliated to transnational extremist movements, such as Al Qaeda networks, Ansar al-Islam, Hizballah, Hamas, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The activities of violent Islamic extremist recruiters in Berlin are especially worrisome. About a dozen young people from Berlin are thought to be in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a direct result of efforts by these recruiters (two of whom were killed in 2010).

The threat of violent Islamic extremism and the fact that a number of youngsters are caught up in the process of radicalization has produced great anxiety among local authorities. This has not yet led to a general policy framework targeting violent Islamic extremism in Berlin, or Germany for that matter, such as the one in place for right-wing extremism. However, authorities state that combating violent Islamic extremism is not only the responsibility of Berlin's police and intelligence services. It concerns the whole city. Leader of the Berlin Verfassungsschutz Claudia Schmid explicitly mentions Muslims and their organizations as important partners in the struggle against violent extremism. According to her, these organizations have the most impact on the target group and are therefore important partners for authorities, although the local Muslim community should also take up this responsibility, combating extremism by participating in state-initiated policy networks.

One of the main ways local authorities are engaging with the city's Muslim communities is through the Islam Forum Berlin. Established in 2005, the forum was created to enhance communication and cooperation between city officials and the Muslim community. Participants at forum meetings include representatives of different organized and non-organized Islamic groups, Berlin politicians and officials (including senators and district mayors), the Berlin police, three Neighborhood Managements, civil society actors, and representatives from the Jewish and Christian communities in Berlin. One particular meeting in 2010 dealt with Islamic violent and non-violent extremism and how it was depicted in the Verfassungsschutz's annual report, though the forum more often seems to discuss other general socio-economic issues.

Through this institutionalized format, Berlin officials are following a very open policy towards local Muslim communities. Local authorities have made great efforts to make the forum as inclusive as possible, representing Berlin's entire spectrum of Muslim ideologies and denominations, including more orthodox and even non-violent extremist organizations. Some forum members represent organizations and

groups that are being surveilled by the Berlin Verfassungsschutz, as the city seeks to address everyone and not exclude controversial voices from the Muslim population. This practice comes in stark contrast to the national-level dialogue conducted by the Islam Forum Berlin, where presumed extremist organizations are excluded from participating.

The local Verfassungsschutz plays a central role in defining extremism in Berlin. They publish an annual report in which violent and non-violent extremist movements are identified, be they left-wing, right-wing, or Islamic extremists. The Verfassungsschutz distinguishes between violent and non-violent Islamic groups, referring to the latter as “legalistically acting Islamist organizations” that comprise orthodox political Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Pakistani Jama’at-e Islami, and the Turkish Millî Görüş. Violent and non-violent extremist groups are defined by the Verfassungsschutz as movements that:

... understand Islam not only as a religion, but as an ideology of domination and as a social system. Central to [Islamic extremism] is the idea that Islam not merely embodies “religion and world/existence” but further represents the impartible unity of “religion” and “politics.”<sup>48</sup>

The Verfassungsschutz annual report is contested for several reasons. First, it is often unclear what criteria are used to classify movements and individuals as extremists. For instance, the Millî Görüş is identified as an extremist organization alongside some individual affiliated mosques as well. As the 2009 annual report states:

As long as there are no signs of a critical reflection within the Millî Görüş movement in Berlin towards Erbakan’s ideology, particularly with its inherent extremism and Anti-Semitism, or no means to fight these tendencies observable, the assessment as an extremist movement persists.<sup>49</sup>

Some individual Millî Görüş mosques are identified as extremist in the reports, though which ones get cited changes every year. Many state actors question the usefulness and accuracy of this information. Dantschke and Luza state the following:

In contrast to right-wing extremism, there is no significant literature on Islamic extremism that can be used [by Berlin authorities to decide which ideologies and organizations are extremists] and also the annual reports of the Berlin ‘Verfassungsschutz’ still don’t serve as a source of information. These reports mention almost no specific names of local organizations. A further difficulty is that some local mosques and organizations externally deny their affiliation with these branches (particularly IGMG: Millî Görüş and Muslim Brotherhood). The lack of transparency applies not only to the structures but also to the internal political agenda of certain organizations. This results in suspicions, rumours, and an overall denegation of reality [of who is extremist and who is not]. The discourse and debates focus on religious and social factors, while political-ideological aspects, which are crucial when dealing with Islamic extremist groups, are ignored.<sup>50</sup>

Our fieldwork in Moabit and Soldiner Kiez revealed that local officials do indeed struggle with information provided by the Verfassungsschutz, namely how to assess it *vis-à-vis* the question of whether or not to engage with those mosques singled out in the annual report. Ultimately, authorities in these two neighborhoods decided to use a pragmatic approach, in which the Verfassungsschutz information was basically ignored, similar to how it was handled in the case of the Islam Forum Berlin. Having a high percentage of Muslim immigrants, both neighborhoods are relatively poor areas within the borough of Berlin-Mitte. State officials we spoke to in these neighborhoods described their attempt to build networks among different groups and institutes, such as other government administrations, private businesses, clubs and associations, and individual residents.

Local mosques tend to play a crucial role in these neighborhood networks, as they are often the most important civil society actor. Both Moabit and Soldiner Kiez were home to mosques labeled as extremist organizations in the 2008 and 2010 Verfassungsschutz annual reports. However, local neighborhood officials tended to take a rather pragmatic approach here, engaging with these mosques, at first not so much to combat religious extremism, but to access the neighborhood population whose social participation they needed to attract and empower. Yet, as described in the introduction of this article, these local networks were used to target possible extremist tendencies, if and when necessary. Protests against the Danish artists' exhibition in Moabit were addressed through this network. Local imams played a crucial role in deflating the situation by visiting the parents of youngsters threatening violence against the art gallery. They subsequently started to collaborate with local officials, holding meetings to discuss sensitive religious issues.

In Soldiner Kiez, we saw a similar response by local officials when it came to engaging presumed extremist organizations. This neighborhood's two main mosques were specified in the Verfassungsschutz report as non-violent extremist: the Interkulturelles Zentrum für Dialog und Bildung (IZDB) (identified as extremist by the 2008 and 2010 reports), an organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Millî Görüs-affiliated Hacı Bayram Mosque (identified as extremist by the 2008 report). Both organizations also participated in the Islam Forum Berlin. Through both organizations, Soldiner Kiez's Neighborhood Management keeps in close contact with, and participates in, several projects that attempt to improve the neighborhood's social cohesion. However, the fact that IZDB is cited in the report makes it difficult for authorities to fund its activities or officially engage them in joint projects; funding presumed extremist organizations is problematic indeed. On an individual basis, local authorities engage with individual board members of these mosques. These personal interactions are subsequently used to evaluate the nature of an organization, seeing if it does prove to have extremist tendencies. The information is then used to decide on the intensity and form of future engagement.

To summarize, Berlin has no official policy for targeting violent Islamic extremism. There are many forms of engagement that at times certainly touch on extremism and through which the entire local Muslim community is targeted. A lot of discussion surrounds a definition of the "real enemy" (e.g., whether or not non-violent extremists can be legitimate partners for engagement). Although most authorities in Berlin ultimately seem to take a rather pragmatic position in this discussion, it seems accurate to conclude that Muslim communities themselves have limited influence in these state-initiated forms of engagement, something which increases forms of stigmatization on a suspect community.

### Amsterdam: Oost

There is no exact information on the number of violent Islamic extremists in Amsterdam. In one policy report on the subject, it is suggested that there are a few dozen individuals who fall under this category.<sup>51</sup> Between 2001 and 2009, at least 156 people were arrested for Islamic terrorism in the Netherlands. Twenty of them were actually convicted; we know that six of them are of Dutch-Moroccan descent and were born and raised in Amsterdam, much like filmmaker Theo van Gogh's murderer, mentioned in the introduction of this article. Since 2006, the Radicalization Information Management (IHH) installed by the city of Amsterdam two years prior in order to monitor, register, and take action on radicalization and extremism has received about twenty reports a year concerning suspicious individuals; of this number, about eight proved to be legitimate cases. Combining these glimpses of information, we might conclude that a few dozen violent extremists in Amsterdam is an overestimation, and less than a dozen is a more precise estimation.

In this light, it is even more striking that from 2005 to 2011, over €28 million was assigned to address violent extremism and its root causes in Amsterdam alone (thus not even counting all the additional money the city received from the national level for specific projects).<sup>52</sup> This is almost ten times more than was received in the period 2008–2011 by Birmingham, a city with over three times Amsterdam's inhabitants that receives the most Prevent program funding. The intensity of Amsterdam's policy has to be explained by the enormous shock caused by the murder of van Gogh.

Amsterdam's strategy against violent extremism is in line with the policy strategy on the national level that was initiated after the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004. The national and the local policy strategy focuses on social issues and, at first sight anyway, lacks a preoccupation with religion. Violent extremism is mainly understood as a youth phenomenon that occurs when isolated individuals of Islamic immigrant background seek their identity and sense of place in a polarized Dutch society. In such a society, conflicts and misunderstandings between groups arise. This, in turn, functions as a breeding ground for violent extremism. The policy framework therefore attempts to target polarization, segregation, and isolation in Dutch society. Programs and projects are established to bring people of different background together, to build social cohesion, and to decrease segregation, isolation, and "parallel societies" in the Netherlands—in short, to target the social breeding ground for violent extremism.<sup>53</sup>

A striking thing about the Amsterdam approach, however, is its heavy emphasis on "Moroccans" and "Islam." Hardly any attention is given to right- or left-wing violent extremism, although both forms are significantly present in Dutch society, albeit perhaps less so in Amsterdam. Almost all the city's policy programs are related in some way to "Moroccans" and/or "Muslims." Many observers have pointed to the stigmatizing effect this has, making violent Islamic extremism in Amsterdam an issue essentially pertaining to young Muslims of Moroccan descent.<sup>54</sup>

Although at first sight the focus seems exclusive to social issues concerning the city's Moroccan community, the policy does in fact devote some attention to religious issues and engagement with Islamic organizations. In one of its main policy reports on violent extremism in Amsterdam, the city explains the following:

Religious organizations can become partners [if we want to fight extremism effectively]. These are joint collaborations in order to target violent

extremism. The partnership makes sense because local authorities are themselves not capable or well equipped to reach possible extremist individuals. Authorities do not have the networks to get to them. Furthermore, authorities have fewer opportunities to intervene [than organizations do] due to the separation of church and state. In order to commonly fight the political ideology of radical Islamism, a religious discourse is inevitably needed to prevent young persons from radicalizing and to offer alternative ideas and concepts. The religious discourse is necessary as Islamic extremists are abusing religious sources. Radical Islamism is a political ideology aiming at a society that is entirely based on Islamic rules and principles. At the same time, the ideology is based on theological interpretations and religious sources. In order to fight radicalization it is vital to provide resilience against these ideologies. This can be achieved through political discussions about peaceful cohabitation but particularly by rectifying and dismissing radical interpretations of religious sources. Thus, the religious aspect needs to be acknowledged.<sup>55</sup>

Here the city of Amsterdam seems clearly interested in establishing a counter-narrative in collaboration with “moderate” organizations. In reality, however, engagement with Islamic organizations did not develop easily, rather provoking a lot of political opposition. An example *par excellence* of a failed attempt at engagement concerns the prestigious Wester Mosque. With support coming from the Amsterdam authorities, the mosque was supposed to be a close building collaboration between the Millî Görüs and a local housing corporation. The Amsterdam authorities decided in the period 2004–2005 to indirectly yet significantly subsidize construction by lowering the city land tax. Framed as “liberal” and “moderate,” the Wester Mosque was expected to make the local Turkish community as a whole more resilient towards extremist tendencies. However, due to internal struggles within the Millî Görüs movement, the plan was not altogether successful. Collaboration ended in 2006 when the Wester Mosque’s new board refused to sign on to Amsterdam authorities’ declarations for the mosque to follow a “moderate” form of Islam.<sup>56</sup> Another failed example concerns Marhaba, an Islamic cultural centre whose stated aim is to foster dialogue between people with different worldviews. This initiative was part of Amsterdam’s official policy against radicalization and polarization that fell under a 2006–2007 policy domain known as the “Fight against extremist breeding grounds.” Failure was brought on by internal struggles within Marhaba’s board alongside the city council’s harsh criticism that state funding for such a debate centre would jeopardize the tenet of separation between church and state. In the end, political discussions about whether any religious organization whatsoever should be used to implement these policy measures resulted in hardly any of Amsterdam’s Islamic organizations being funded under the policy against violent extremism.<sup>57</sup>

We found a similar failed attempt to engage permanently with local mosques in Oost, one of Amsterdam’s seven city districts. Here, a project as part of the fight against violent extremism was meant to increase the resilience of Muslims at the neighborhood level against violent Islamic extremist ideologies. Local mosques played a crucial role. The project coordinator assumed that the application of religious knowledge and related skills would make youngsters more resilient against extremist tendencies. As he told us during our fieldwork, this sort of knowledge was

only present within the religious infrastructure of Muslims in Amsterdam. A lot of time and energy was first invested into visiting Turkish and Moroccan neighborhood mosques to find out what their viewpoints were on issues related to violent extremism and what kind of problems they perceived as being serious for youngsters. Apparently, this approach had some effect, as the boards of most local mosques became increasingly more willing to talk openly about topics such as violent extremism, Islam's image in Dutch society, and various other religious matters not discussed openly before. Eventually, this project was discontinued and further engagement with Islamic organizations ended.

Instead of collaborating with religious organizations, Oost engaged with religious individuals aiming to access the wider Muslim population. Amsterdam authorities termed them "key figures" from the Moroccan Muslim population who possessed some sort of religious credentials, such as imams or informal religious leaders, with knowledge of, and legitimacy among, the target group—young Muslims in Amsterdam. The individuals were not affiliated with a particular mosque or religious organization and, in some instances, had an extremist—sometimes violent—past themselves. According to Amsterdam authorities, they provided necessary religious knowledge and had enough credibility to act with authority, even if they lacked a clear audience constituency.

By such selecting individuals, Amsterdam authorities in districts like Oost hoped to access their target group without involving actual organizations. A still unanswered question is whether this access is actually attainable. It is unclear what the constituency of these key figures really is and to whom they can provide access. Immigrant organizations and local mosques do not represent an entire community, *per se*, but as one of our respondents stated:

You know at least that these organizations have a constituency, however small that may be. We do not know this of these so-called key figures who are selected by the authorities and provided with a prominent role and position in the implementation of policy against violent Islamic extremism.<sup>58</sup>

Some key figures who play an important role in local policies can be considered former or present extremists or may at least possess religious ideas that mainstream society would probably consider as extremist. Apparently, the city district does not consider this problematic. In fact, several of these individuals—some of whom have become civil servants (i.e., locally appointed neighborhood experts on violent extremism) responsible for implementing policies against violent extremism in Oost—became the subject of local media that criticizes their extremist past and questions their current beliefs. In these instances, local authorities defended the individuals by naming them an "indispensable asset" in the fight against violent extremism. Moreover, they were characterized as "bridge-builders" between Muslims and non-Muslims in Amsterdam, which, according to authorities, is vital to targeting violent Islamic extremism.<sup>59</sup>

To conclude, the entire Moroccan community in Amsterdam is targeted and constructed as a suspect community. At the same time, state-initiated forms of engagement with Muslim organizations are being frustrated by a general political opposition against any state collaboration with religious organizations. As an alternative, we see the emergence of state-initiated engagement with individual Muslims

who may have an orthodox or extremist worldview. It is doubtful whether these individuals have strong networks in their local Muslim communities. The communities themselves seem to lack influence on such forms of engagement, which possibly increases the danger of stigmatization.

## Conclusion

Our fieldwork has shown, regardless of the fact that the national policy contexts in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands differ significantly, that local authorities in London, Berlin, and Amsterdam target violent Islamic extremism by focusing on the position of the entire local Muslim communities in their cities. Not focusing on the tiny minority of actually violent individuals, this approach thus led to the construction of a suspect community. All three cities we studied used engagement with their local Muslim communities as a main policy tool to target violent Islamic extremism and to neutralize the threat posed by violent extremism. Yet, by targeting the entire community, authorities in all three cities risked constructing a suspect community. That could comprise a local Muslim community or, in some cases, specific ethnic groups such as Pakistanis in London or Moroccans in Amsterdam. Viewing a whole group as inherently suspicious proved conducive to the severe stigmatization of an entire community.

That said, we did not find that engagement with Islamic organizations or individuals was used to directly change the nature of local Muslim communities, as Laurence<sup>60</sup> would predict as per state support for moderate organizations. Orthodox and non-violent extremist organizations and individuals in all three cities were potential partners for engagement, a prospect that probably lowers the chance of stigmatization of the whole community. Indirectly, though, many value-based debates emerged in the cities; some policy programs against violent extremism clearly reflected religious content or were conducive to avid discussions on the definition of extremism, potential links between non-violent and violent forms of extremism, and the position of orthodox religious groups in the city.

Comparing the models implemented in London, Berlin, and Amsterdam, we see how subtle differences in engagement appear to impact the effects of the engagement. These distinctions relate to the degree to which communities themselves have control over the practice of engagement, be it from above or below—for example, whether extremist voices can join in (and, if so, how much) and whether definitions of legitimate partnership are defined from above or below. In London's Tower Hamlet, communities themselves have a relatively large input concerning these forms of engagement; although at times non-violent extremist actors are excluded from collaboration, orthodox actors are seen as legitimate partners for engagement. Berlin hosts heated debates on the position of non-violent extremist actors, but local authorities tend towards a more pragmatic inclusive approach; nevertheless, here we found none of the more intensive partnerships between orthodox Muslim organizations that we saw in Tower Hamlets. On the other hand, in Amsterdam, forms of engagement with religious organizations do not emerge due to some strong political opposition to dialogue between authorities and religious organizations, notably orthodox organizations. As a consequence, pursued instead is an engagement with individual Muslims, regardless of their religious affiliation. However, in this individual-based approach the communities themselves seem to have very limited control; engagement is ultimately a decision from above. Here it is apt to echo Akkerman et al.,<sup>61</sup> who

argue that there are good reasons to distrust forms of engagement from above. Networks and associations involved in state-initiated policymaking not only become vulnerable to shifts in public policy, but also become excessively skewed in the direction of the state. This often grants state actors more opportunities to construct suspect communities, producing negative consequences for the groups involved and quite possibly creating a breeding ground for future extremism.

This article also shows how a local-level practice of counterterrorism quickly devolves into a complicated, multiplex discussion about immigration, belonging, citizenship, Islam, and the position of Muslim communities in Western cities. To better understand local authorities' approaches and their capacity to, on the one hand, stigmatize Muslim communities and, on the other hand, minimize people's penchant for violent extremism, we need more systematic studies. Above all, we need more detailed micro-level research on the implementation of such policies in cities, city districts, and neighborhoods.

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58. Interview with project manager in Amsterdam Oost, April 2011.
59. Vermeulen and Bovenkerk (see note 4 above).
60. Laurence, "The Corporatist Antecedent of Contemporary State-Islam Relations" (see note 27 above).
61. Akkerman et al. (see note 28 above).