



Canadian Mosque Sets Up 'Detox' Program for Would-Be Terrorists

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By Kathleen Foster



A Canadian mosque is taking a page from the Alcoholics Anonymous guidebook and applying it to its fight against terrorism.

Leaders at the Masjid el Noor Mosque in Toronto say Muslims who get sucked in to an extremist interpretation of Islam become addicted to faith, just as an alcoholic is addicted to alcohol. So the mosque has set up a 12-step program to "detox" budding radicals before it's too late.

The "Specialized De-Radicalization Intervention Program" was sponsored by the mosque's director, Mohammed Shaikh, who says the program is the first of its kind. Shaikh, who used to work as a police chaplain, says the 12 steps are geared toward young people who have fallen in with the "wrong crowd," often through connections made on the Internet.

"The Internet is one of the biggest problems. Online, they can seek out people who think like they do," Shaikh said.

Parents who suspect their teenagers or young adults are heading in the wrong direction bring them to Shaikh, a trusted member of the community. One of the counselors he has recruited for the program, Ahmed Amiruddin from the Ahlus Sunnah Foundation of Canada, says the goal is to show the radicalized youth that Al Qaeda's beliefs are theologically wrong.

"Their interpretation of the Islamic faith is inconsistent with the last 1,400 years of Islamic schools of thought," Amiruddin says, "We clarify the differences and bring people back toward the traditional interpretation of the Islamic faith, which completely rejects suicide bombings and extremism in all of its forms."

The 12 steps incorporate verses from the Koran that speak of peace, address worldwide conflicts and highlight the need of Muslims to find common ground — not "fighting ground" — with other faiths.

Toronto Police Superintendent Brody Smollet, who worked with Shaikh when he was a police chaplain, welcomes the program. "If Mr. Shaikh is successful," Smollet said, "if he can bring even a few of the youth out of that radicalization, it would be a real benefit to our society, in our community, in our country as a whole."

Mosque leaders would like to see their 12 steps used throughout Canada, which has 580,000 Muslims, about 2 percent of the population. They have reached out to the Canadian government, offering to help courts deal with terrorism cases, including well-publicized terror suspects like Omar Khadr, a Canadian who is accused of killing an American soldier in Afghanistan and is being held at Guantanamo Bay.

They would also like to work to detox "The Toronto 18" — a group of 18 young men who were arrested in 2006 and accused of plotting to bomb Toronto landmarks and government buildings. One of the 18 was convicted last year, 10 are awaiting trial and seven have been released.

The Canadian government says it is "committed to reaching out to various communities to foster dialogue on national security matters, including extremism" but has not yet accepted the Masjid el Noor Mosque's offer.

Counterterrorism expert Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, who wrote about his own return from Muslim extremism in his book "My Year Inside Radical Islam," says the 12 steps could be helpful for people found guilty in terror cases, but the program should not be used in lieu of punishment.

"Saudi Arabia and Yemen have had programs with a very high recidivism rate, Gartenstein-Ross said. "Part of the reason for that is that is all people have to do in order to complete the program is announce their own deradicalization. They have every incentive to declare themselves deradicalized and there is very little to lose in doing so."

Smollet says he doesn't think Toronto has a problem with Islamic radicalism, but he stresses that the detox program isn't only for deeply entrenched radicals. "The program is designed to look at people who are just, kind of on the fringes. They're not hard core, radical terrorist people. They are right at the stage of their life where they could go either way."

Amiruddin is currently using the 12 steps in the treatment of three young people at the mosque, one of them female. He says he thinks it will take six months or less to reform them. He says some see the light as soon as they go through Step 1: "Who is Allah?"

"Most people, once they realize, 'Hey, I even have God wrong here,' most people do want to change," Amiruddin said.

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