

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Fighting violent extremism by teaching tolerance

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August 27, 2018

Although terrorism understandably has become the focus of U.S. foreign policy, the problem of religious intolerance and violence is far broader. As Islamic extremism has erupted throughout the Middle East, most dramatically in Iraq and Syria, Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities are being driven from their historic homes.

What to do? U.S. “public diplomacy” has been ineffective, essentially attempting to put lipstick on a pig in terms of selling American foreign policy. Washington has spent millions on foreign aid to promote education and provide social services for supposedly at-risk Islamic youth, without any evident impact on violent behavior.

America’s military response has turned into endless war, which appears to create as many terrorists as are captured or killed. Indeed, America’s multiple interventions and wars have both spawned violent extremists and created chaos in which they thrive.

However, the fact that there is no simple, quick answer doesn’t mean there is nothing to do. The group Hardwired, run by Tina Ramirez, a former Capitol Hill staffer, engages in what it calls “rights-based education,” which has had notable if so far small-scale success in building support for religious tolerance and liberty.

I witnessed the group’s approach at a conference held in Erbil, Kurdistan. Hardwired brought together people of varying, even contentious faiths and backgrounds — most of whom had suffered persecution at the hands of Islamic radicals. Although divided in beliefs, they came to recognize their shared interest in respecting the rights of others.

Hardwired’s programs also address children, which it details in a new study. The report reviewed the group’s efforts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco, involving 56 teachers and 1161 students at 46 different schools.

The overall assessment: “students demonstrated greater acceptance of the rights of others, greater respect for the equal rights of women and minority communities, were less intimidated by public expression of belief, and reflected greater resiliency to extremist thinking.”

As almost everyone recognizes, kids are the most important target for purveyors of violence. However, most teachers are ill-prepared for such a battle.

Into this breach stepped Hardwired. It explained: “To make children resilient to radicalization and reduce the likelihood that they will repeat the violent extremism they have witnessed or experienced, we must change the way they see and treat others.” This takes intensive effort.

But it is Hardwired’s specialty. At the seminar I attended, Tina helped lead the diverse attendees who worked together on various exercises. Out of that came respect for the lives, dignity, and faiths of others.

Hardwired took a similar approach with schoolchildren and their teachers. Explained the group, “Nearly 1,200 children from three countries were taught to value the dignity and freedom of others through simple lessons that used analogies to encourage them to have tough conversations about their beliefs, misconceptions and fear of others.”

Much of the effort was directed at kids who had suffered horrific persecution. Noted Hardwired, “for the first time, these severely traumatized children learned that they were valued, regardless of what they believed, and deserved to be treated with respect and dignity.”

The program does not attempt to challenge or change religious teachings. Rather, it emphasizes respect for others’ lives and dignity. The objective is “to help individuals develop new ways of understanding their religion and culture compared to the rights of people of different religions and beliefs.”

Reaching teachers is an important aspect of Hardwired’s efforts. The desire “is to provide teachers with tools to build a more peaceful and inclusive society by leading youth toward a greater respect for the dignity and freedom of people of different religions or beliefs, while at the same time helping teachers promote a positive counter-narrative to the ideas that inspire intolerance and violent extremism.”

The program is just a start but could become a model for much broader use. Certainly the program’s results warrant expansion.

Hardwired’s report details how “educating children to value the rights and freedoms of people of different religions and beliefs can influence positive, sustainable changes in their communities. Importantly, children consistently exhibited positive movement in their perspective of and behavior toward others that made them more inclusive of others.”

Yet even this understates the potential for personal change and growth. In Erbil I watched Christians, Yazidis, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and even a Jew, who had lost a hand in a terrorist bombing, work together. Personal transformation offers the only sure, long-term answer to build a more tolerant, less violent world.

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