

Vilvoorde: The Brussels district fighting radicalisation with kindness

'We need to recognise that when young people feel isolated and lonely, they become vulnerable to this ideology'

Leo Cendrowicz | Thursday, 31 December 2015



Hans Bonte, mayor of Vilvoorde, has stemmed the flow of local jihadists heading for Syria *Getty Images*

On the northern rim of Belgium's capital, the district of Vilvoorde was once mentioned in the same breath as [Molenbeek](#), the troubled Brussels commune that was home to some of the jihadists involved in the Paris attacks.

Vilvoorde was a hotbed of Islamic radicalism, and jihadists from the district have been seen on YouTube clips boasting from the Syrian battlefields about their killing. Of the 28 who left for Syria, eight have since returned, at least five are known to have died fighting for [Isis](#), and two are in jail. "It's not fun to be known as a mayor of the centre of jihadism," Hans Bonte, the municipality's leader tells *The Independent*. "So I decided from the start not to make a taboo out of it."

“We need to recognise that when young people feel isolated and lonely, they become vulnerable to this ideology,” said Mr Bonte. “If we want to deal with this, we have to open our doors to these men, and to the families, the friends, the girlfriends, the brothers. We have to make them feel welcome. We have to give them support and warmth.”

When Mr Bonte became mayor in 2013, he launched a bold plan to staunch the influence of jihadism on his town’s disaffected youth. His approach seems to work: although dozens of young men have left Vilvoorde to fight in Syria since 2011, none have gone there since May 2014.

Mr Bonte’s record has caught the eye of [Barack Obama](#), who invited him to address a White House terrorism summit this year. And Vilvoorde’s efforts have impressed the US embassy in Brussels, which sent an eight-strong team from the Department of Homeland Security for a week-long research tour of the area where, some 500 years ago, [William Tyndale](#), who translated the Bible into English, was strangled and then burnt at the stake for heresy.

Mr Bonte, 53, a youth counsellor in Molenbeek in the 1980s, is also Vilvoorde’s MP, with the Dutch-speaking socialist party, SP.a. Above his desk is a painting by the Vilvoorde-born orientalist painter [Jean-François Portaels](#) of a warrior with a pipe, called The Syrian Smoker.

Vilvoorde was at the heart of a European-wide industrial crisis 20 years ago when Renault closed its local car plant without warning. But it has re-emerged to become a beacon of revival and its population rose 11.5 per cent in the five years until 2012, making it the fastest-growing town in the country.

Most of the new residents have foreign origins, and now account for 43 per cent of its population. Nearly half of them are unemployed. The social shift explains why the jihadists’ recruitment drive initially succeeded.

“They indoctrinate with the same message: ‘You are born to be a hero,’” Mr Bonte says. “They say: ‘You can be someone. You can be the one and only. You can lead the caliphate. You don’t need these school troubles, these job worries, this family life.’ They say you are unemployed because you are Muslim; you are not accepted because you are Muslim. They say the cowards stay here: the real heroes go to Syria.”

The brainwashing is followed by isolation, cutting the young person off from friends and family, sports or youth clubs, school or work colleagues. “I have seen mothers in tears, who say ‘Why does my son want to kill me if I try to stop him going to Syria?’” Mr Bonte says.

The mayor admits his response, what he calls the “Vilvoorde method”, was a shot in the dark. “There was no manual for this sort of problem,” he says. He called on two women to help him: Jessika Soors, a deradicalisation official and a PhD student in Islamic

studies, and Fatima Lamarti, the daughter of Vilvoorde's first Muslim immigrant, and Mr Bonte's councillor for social integration.

Mr Bonte equates radicalisation and terrorism to an iceberg: it may look massive, but it can still melt. "We need solidarity, love and human warmth," he says. "Warmth alone can melt an iceberg."

The essence of the approach was local trust: if anyone is seen as a potential jihadist recruit, family, friends, teachers and mosques spring into action to talk him out of it. It is the reverse of the radicalisation process.



Vilvoorde is Belgium's fastest-growing town with 43 per cent of the population born abroad (AFP/Getty)

"We have to see the individual stories behind each radicalisation," Mr Bonte says. "We have to build tailor-made strategies. If we know Mohammed is being radicalised, we gather round tables of people who can influence him. We surround him so that he can reconnect with social life. We say, 'We see you have some problems, but really, going to Syria is a terrible idea. And it's not even part of the Koran.'"

The strategy is one of vigilance and engagement. Mr Bonte says he speaks to young people who have returned from Syria, to show that the town is involved. It is also a social challenge: he says that while budding Syrian fighters might be described as mentally ill, a society that delivers its children into the hands of extremists "is seriously sick".

The response, Mr Bonte says, has to be as inclusive as possible. "You have to tackle their frustrations, frustrations that are under your noses."

One obvious move is to hire more Muslim police officers. “Minorities don’t recognise themselves in police forces. We are giving them the best recruiting tool when police target Muslims,” Mr Bonte says.

Another danger emerges when politicians demonise Muslims. “The risk – and you can see this with Donald Trump in America – is of mixing radicalism, immigrants, Muslims and terrorism all in the same bag. That is the worst thing we can do,” he says.

This approach is backed by experts. “We need to address the frustrations of the hard core that lives outside society, that feels no stake in the community,” says Rik Coolsaet, a professor at Ghent University. “In Vilvoorde, they learnt that every model has to include everyone, including the local imam. There is no guarantee of success, but this is the way forward to prevent a new generation leaving for Syria.”

Mr Bonte is not complacent. He estimates that Vilvoorde still has about 45 potential jihadist recruits, including girls. “I don’t pretend it is over,” he says. “That’s why I touch wood.”