# How do people radicalize?☆

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A B S T R A C T

Very little is known about how violent extremist practices are learned, and the role of educational channels through which they are spread. This empirical study extrapolates insights specific to the Bosnian and Herzegovinian context to demonstrate how one ultraconservative ideology, Salafism, can radically alter the dominant thinking and behavior of ordinary individuals once they feel *displaced* from the mainstream institutions and particularly from the formal education. At the core of the *displacement and replacement model of radicalization* is an informal and tactful teacher, influencer, or a mentor that individuals connect with either online or in person. Using the primary data collected in Bosnia and Herzegovina through 20 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with radicalized persons, the study sequences a ten-step radicalization model through which the interviewees have transformed from ordinary citizens into radicalized actors with a potential to engage in violent extremism.

## 1. Introduction

At the core of the *displacement and replacement model of radicalization* is an informal and tactful teacher, influencer, or a mentor that individuals connect with either online or in person (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021; 2020a; 2020b; 2016a). Radicalization begins with a sense of *displacement* from the mainstream institutions and particularly from the formal education. The mentor, in person or online, *replaces* institutional actors and other sources of knowledge to become a guide through transformative and experiential learning. This *replacement* can turn into radicalizing education where extremist narratives subversively minimize the relevance of formal institutions, education, and teachers. They are deliberately constructed outside the classrooms to appeal to disenfranchised individuals who harbor grievances. Formal classrooms and institutions are replaced with personal tutorials, webinars, speeches, and podcasts curated by informal mentors, influencers, and recruiters who project blame for individual and societal problems to a targeted group that ultimately becomes the object of hate. This radicalization model warns that failures in the formal education system push students to look for validation elsewhere, which is where they meet radicalizing alternatives.

Very little is known about how violent extremist practices are learned, and the role of educational channels through which they are spread. The model highlights the informal learning in the radicalization process. Here, informal learning refers to varied forms of learning occurring outside formal classroom and educational institutions. Both children and adults learn independently and even incidentally in their physical or virtual social environments where their knowledge acquisition is either self-guided or guided by trusted mentors, friends, colleagues, guides, or peers that serve as role models (Schugurensky, 2000; Marsick and Volpe, 1999). This model adds to the scholarship by introducing a novel link between mentorship, informal learning, and radicalization.

Situated within the Bosnian context, *the educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization* demonstrates how the alternative and informal teaching, offered in person or via traditional or social media, can deepen a person's sense of *displacement* by the formal education institutions and, in doing so, initiate radicalization. Using the primary data collected in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) via 20 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with radicalized persons, the study sequences a ten-step radicalization model through which these interviewees have transformed from ordinary citizens to radicalized actors with a potential to engage in violent extremism. With the help of mentors, they have adopted Salafism as an ultraconservative ideology that can radically alter the dominant thinking and behavior of individuals.

## 2. Background: emergence of different forms of radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Helped by Bosnian Serbs, Serbia invaded Bosnia and Herzegovina in

early 1992 to implement the genocide against primarily Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), ultimately aiming to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina's territory and create Greater Serbia – a racially and ethnically pure nation for Serbs only. Prior to the war, Radovan Karadzic, along with other members of the Bosnian Serb leadership, publicly declared that Serbs would "use the Serbian-supported war machinery to make life impossible for civilians" and that "Muslims will disappear…from the face of the Earth" (International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, 2004, np). In 2005, the U.S. Congress confirmed that "the Serbian policies of aggression and ethnic cleansing meet the terms defining genocide", where genocide refers to the intentional and systemic attempt to eradicate an ethnic, religious, or racial group (U.S. Congress Senate Resolution 134, 2005).

In several of its rulings, The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia established that the Serbs' forces committed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 through 1995. During the trial of Serbia's president, Slobodan Milosevic - charged with 66 counts of crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in other nations in the Balkans - the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2004, np), reconfirmed its prior findings that the Serb forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina committed genocide against Bosniaks:

> "[T]here existed a joint criminal enterprise, which included members of the Bosnian Serb leadership, whose aim and intention was to destroy a part of the of Bosnian Muslim population, and that genocide was in fact committed…The genocidal intent of the Bosnian Serb leadership can be inferred from all the evidence…The scale and pattern of the attacks, their intensity, the substantial number of Muslims killed…the detention of Muslims, their brutal treatment in detention centers and elsewhere, and the targeting of persons essential to the survival of the Muslims as a group are all factors that point to genocide."

After nearly four years of mass killings and rapes of Bosniaks, the Dayton Peace Accord was signed at the end of 1995, under the auspices of the United States and the international community. The Accord produced imperfect peace, ethnically dividing the country into two entities, legitimizing the effects of the genocide the Serb forces committed (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2009). Serbs were principally allowed to retain the territory they militarily captured and ethnically cleansed calling it Republika Srpska. Of 344,803 Bosniaks who lived in the parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina that Serbs subsequently cleansed of Bosnian Muslims, only 7933 Bosniaks remained in the Serb-dominated region post-genocide (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 2004). While at the time of the Dayton Peace Accord signing in late 1995, the international community did not have the full knowledge of the Serb leadership, police, and military's involvement in the genocide against Bosnian Muslims, the international community knew of the concentration camps, ethnic cleansing, and grave violations of human rights by the Serb forces as early as in 1992. The 1992 United Nations' resolution 47/121 (United Nations, 1992) recognized that there was:

> "[T]he deterioration of the situation in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina owing to intensified aggressive acts by the Serbian and Montenegrin forces to acquire more territories by force, characterized by a consistent pattern of gross and systematic violations of human rights, a burgeoning refugee population resulting from mass expulsions of defenseless civilians from their homes and the existence in Serbian and Montenegrin controlled areas of concentration camps and detention centers, in pursuit of the abhorrent policy of "ethnic cleansing", which is a form of genocide…."

Later, the creator of the Dayton Peace Accord, Richard Holbrooke, regretted that he had given into Serbia's then President, Slobodan

Milosevic, demand that the Serb entity be called Republika Srpska or, in translation, the Serb Republic (Holbrooke, 2011; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2016b).

The consequent ethnic segregation split the country into two ethnic entities – Serbs primarily live in the Republika Srpska while Bosniaks and Croats reside in the other half of the country called Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Beyond 2.2 million people who were displaced, over 100,000 who were killed, and 50,000 women who were raped, the collective trauma inflicted on Bosnian Muslims was magnified by 80% of the country's 1144 mosques (Ozturk, 2018) being damaged or destroyed to eradicate Bosniaks' culture and history from the region.

Serbia continues to interfere by supporting the post-war Serb leadership in Bosnia in racializing Muslims as the other-ed group in the larger European context even after the European Court of Human Rights, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia have all established that Serb forces committed the genocide against Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2019, the chief prosecutor at the UN court in The Hague, Serge Brammertz, called the continued genocide denial by Serbia unacceptable: "It cannot be tolerated that just last week a government minister called the Srebrenica genocide false while a member of parliament congratulated Ratko Mladic for the genocide which, he said, was a brilliant military operation" (Stojanovic, 2019, np). In 2017, Ratko Mladic, a Bosnian Serb general and commander of the Bosnian Serb forces was convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia of 10 counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Yadav, 2021).

The hate narrative targeting Muslims enabled genocide. Though cultivated by the Serb nationalists for centuries, it was magnified in 1980 s by Slobodan Milosevic, an authoritarian and former President of Serbia (Sabic-El-Rayess 2022a, 2022b). Former U.S. Ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, a principal actor in the peace negotiations and humanitarian efforts in the former Yugoslavia confirmed that Slobodan Milosevic "was the architect of a policy of creating Greater Serbia and that little happened without his knowledge and involvement" (International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, 2004, p. 59). Milosevic's strategy was to create a fear inducing narrative to compel ordinary Serbs to take up arms and justify the killings of Muslims in Bosnia. While not all Serbs supported or partook in the genocide against Bosnian Muslims, mass radicalization of the Serb population did occur under the auspices of Milosevic as one of the most popular Serb nationalists of the 20th century. His media machinery generated fictionalized stories evoking othering and hate of Muslims (Zulic, 2018) ultimately helping him radicalize ordinary Serbs and initiate multiple wars in the former Yugoslavia.

In the Republika Srpska's schools today, genocide denial remains pervasive though it was banned in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the international community on July 28, 2021 (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022a, 2022b). Serbs continue to leverage Russia's military, political, and economic support (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022a, 2020; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020c). Bosniaks, scarred by the intergenerational trauma, feel abandoned by the international community and invisible to the country's corrupt political gentry (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022a, 2016c, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2009; Sabic-El-Rayess and Heyneman, 2020; Sabic-El-Rayess and Seeman, 2017; Sabic-El-Rayess and Mansur, 2016). Continued genocide denial, coupled with Serbs' radicalization and Russia's presence, have facilitated a reciprocal radicalization within a small sub-segment of Bosniaks who fear another genocide.

In this fragile context and vacuum left by the Western powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia now vie for influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study examines how Salafism, an ultraconservative sect within Islam that originated in the 18th century Saudi Arabia as a reformist movement seeking to revive purity and piousness in Islam while repudiating corruption and resisting Western colonization, has emerged in Bosnia where Salafism did not exist prior to the war. The Bosnian setting is particularly interesting as Pew Research confirms that Bosnian Muslims,

despite being subjected to genocide, remain the most tolerant Muslims in the world. Throughout their long history in the region, Bosniaks have demonstrated their respect for and inclusion of other ethnic group (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022c). Yet, in this tolerant space, Salafis were still able to build a following. Salafi recruiters are capable of transforming initially unreceptive individuals into supporters self-conforming to rigid ideas that were once alien to the new converts. But, how do they do it? The study outlines the conversion process into Salafism as based on the lived experiences of a small group of converts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## 3. Literature review: role of education in radicalization

This analysis assumes education is an effort, either individual and collective, to acquire knowledge in schools as formal institutions (*formal education*) or in social environments where individuals experience and learn about the world outside the confines of educational institutions (*informal education*). The study applies the *Experiential Learning Theory* (ELT), which "affords equal status to multiple ways of knowing" (Rainey and Kolb, 1995, p. 131). According to Kolb (1984), learning occurs in 4 stages: learners go through an experience; reflect on it; analyze the process in abstract to learn from it; and finally engage in actively experimenting with the new knowledge by applying it. Individuals who radicalize, this study finds, are often reacting to the marginalizing and silencing experience in schools that they or their children had, which ultimately forces them to seek alternative ways of knowing and sense making. This perspective yields a new answer to how a person radicalizes by recognizing that the radicalizing actor has often been deprived from an inclusive educational experience, which plays a critical role in their consequent radicalization.

As Payne (2017) argues, humans have historically and instinctually seen the world in relative terms, by comparing themselves and their standing to those around them. Another study finds that even the conception of poverty is not absolute but relative - school children and women see themselves as haves or have nots relative to their peers (Sabic-El-Rayess et al., 2019; Fadhil and Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2019). Though a practice not exclusive to the Western world (Sabic-El-Rayess and Joshi, 2022), the collective West has treated Muslims as lesser relative to self (Allen, 2010; Sayyid Vakil, 2010; Bayraklı and Hafez, 2016), and Muslims recognize and experience that inferior position in educational and other contexts (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022a), which shapes their coping mechanisms and their own informal learning. Cockcroft (2012, 83) notes that Islam began as a reformative movement aimed at purifying government to ensure "[m]orality was not only a question of ethics but also a basis of government", making Islam an appealing framework for those viewing their societies and elites as corrupt, immoral and self-serving - a common sentiment shared by the *educationally displaced* individuals who see themselves and their communities as wronged by the power holders.

Recent literature in the field of education offers insights into the challenges Muslims may experience particularly in the Western environment (Husain, 2009; Pels and de Ruyter, 2012; Revell, 2010; Esposito, 1999; Panjwani, 2017) though none zooms in on the education's role in the radicalization of European Muslims living in Bosnia. In the UK, Muslim immigrants have been studied primarily through the security lens and within the framework of the government's Prevent program centered on detecting the radicalizing Muslim youth in British classrooms (Awan, 2012). Much of the research on the Prevent program has criticized the program's stigmatization of the Muslim community; lacking comparable focus on the radicalizing far-right youths emerging throughout the UK and Europe; and excluding immigrant Muslim youths from the critical engagement in the classroom (Heath-Kelly, 2017). In the 35 OECD countries, Muslims have become a growing target of terrorism resulting from anti-Muslim racism (Hayden, 2017). Fear of Muslims is not abating even among the moderate European youths (Pels and de Ruyter, 2012). Muslims first learn of their peers' rejection in

schools as a reflection of a larger societal truth.

For Foucault (1975), societal institutions serve to disguise certain truths and how power truly operates under the veil of apparent independence and abstract principles. Foucault (1991) further argues that power is not only institutionally manifested but rather operates all around us. The analysis capitalizes on that claim to suggest how power is demonstrative in all that transpires through education – formal and informal. Formal education - through curriculum, discussions, representations, and peer and teacher interactions - has the power to include or exclude, marginalize, or center. In the Western context, Muslim youths experience anti-Muslim racism, isolation, and marginalization through the curriculum (Zaal, 2012; Hossain, 2017). Even within religious education that is aimed at broadening perspectives on religion, students link Islam to violence (Revell, 2010). Pels and de Ruyter (2012) argue that preventive measures ought to include examining the quality of young Muslims' socialization environments in schools given that radicalization occurs during the formative years when youth's sociopolitical identities are amenable to change.

This study shows that the alternative educational narrative offered by Salafis fills the lacuna left by schools when they fail to evoke a sense of inclusion, purpose, and belonging for the marginalized and other-ed. As Foucault (1975), Sabic-El-Rayess and Mansur (2019) would put it, education helps construct certain "truth regimes" that are in constant flux as they shape and guide dominant narratives, social behaviors, and norms. What is welcomed as the prevailing view, marginalized as the unwanted perspective, or silenced as the unacceptable voice is constantly negotiated by the stakeholders in quest for power. Muslims cope with these tensions by disengaging when they realize they are operating within an educational system that is likely to target or fail them. Positionality of young Muslims as a uniformly stereotyped identity pushes them to internalize such categorization, only furthering their marginalization and isolation: a sense of rejection ultimately deepens their self-isolation and devotion to Islam (Moors, 2009).

But, how exactly individuals transition from first experiencing marginalization within schools to radicalizing is not well understood. Radicalization is both a process and a destination with aversion to modernity, tolerance, and progress whether within Muslim or non-Muslim communities (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a). It is rigid in thought and behavior, and terrorism is a violent expression of the individual or group's grievances morally justified by the radicalized beliefs.

Pels and de Ruyter, (2012) have shown that teachers tend to *other* Muslims. Often, vocational schooling is considered a policy solution to integrating Muslims in the multiethnic European societies, but such approach patronizes Muslims and implicitly asserts that the Muslims' functional purpose in the multiethnic and multiracial societies is limited. In Netherlands, the second generation Muslim immigrants who are trained in vocational schools tend to have greater social, economic, and mental health challenges than their parents, indicating the failed integration (Van Geel and Vedder, 2010). The vocational schools favor the authoritarian teaching style that precludes students from critically engaging with the curricular content (Pels and de Ruyter, 2012). This *educational displacement* of Muslims into these disciplined spaces produces susceptibility to radicalization. The approach positions Muslims as a uniformed collective with a limited potential to contribute to their societies.

Obtaining a degree or achieving academic success does not equate to gaining a sense of belonging in a school environment. Sabic-El-Rayess and Laura Sullivan (2020d) chronicle a Bosnian Muslim experience of discrimination in the schooling system of the former Yugoslavia that can lead to a lacking sense of belonging and recognition despite academic success. The Bosniak community has suffered not only physical displacement, genocide, and ethnic segregation since the 1990 s, but it has been subjected to a multigenerational displacement from the educational system in the former Yugoslavia that worked to transpose Bosniaks, their lived experiences, and representations from the mainstream curriculum in schools (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2022a, 2022b;

Sabic-El-Rayess and Laura Sullivan, 2020d). *Educational displacement* translates into being invisible in the educational curricula leaving a permanent imprint on those affected, in this instance, the Bosniak collective. Sabic-El-Rayess argues that when there is the prevailing absence of representation of Muslims and curricula incorporating a Muslim experience, *educational displacement* is deepened while the Muslim invisibility is normalized.

Other scholars (Hilgendorf, 2003) have argued that the denial of Islam as the constructive basis for education and favoring of the Western model of education exacerbates grievances and *educational displacement* in the Muslim world. Thus, it is not one's affiliation with Islam that radicalizes youths. Religion alone neither sufficiently nor adequately explains why individuals radicalize. Instead, *educational displacement* - shaped by a sense of exclusion, grievances, and deprivation - sends one on a search for belonging during which a person can radicalize. This is why the study formulates a more nuanced perspective on radicalization, where Islam is not the primary instigator of radicalization of young Muslims in Bosnia but a default, almost incidental ideological option resorted to by the educationally and socially displaced.

## 4. Methodological framework

The analysis discusses the role of education in the radicalization process that Salafis deploy in Bosnia. This work is a sub-segment of a larger study involving 50 in-person, audio-recorded, and semi-structured interviews with individuals ranging from ultraconservative Muslims to Salafi converts with potentially violent tendencies. The radicalization model introduced in the upcoming section is derived specifically on a selected sub-set of 20 in-depth audio-recorded and semi-structured interviews with 16 men and 4 women who have fully converted into Salafism.

It took several years to find an entry point into the self-isolating Salafi communities. Being a researcher with substantive experience in the region was critical to gaining access to those communities. The study was carefully crafted as the effort to understand the attitudes towards education, the experience of *educational displacement*, if any, and the learning process during which individuals transformed from often not being religious to becoming ultraconservative Salafis. This research was focused on understanding Salafis' experiential, informal, and transformative learning without judging or demonizing the group, making them open to participating in this research.

While the vast majority of Bosnian Muslims do not endorse Salafism as one of the most conservative sects in Islam, the estimates suggest that a very small and select group does. The process started with several hundred Salafis who came to Bosnia as missionaries after the war, often financed by Saudi Arabia but unwelcomed by Bosnia and Herzegovina's official Islamic Community that has cultivated a 600-year old tolerant version of Islam authentic to the region (Rose, 2019). Today, in Bosnia, there are anywhere between 20,000 and 50,000 Salafis (Rose, 2019). While the number of the Salafi adherents is not high, in a post-war country of about 3.3 million people where the Muslim community has been traumatized by the genocide and where Salafism was unknown until the mid 1990 s, this Salafi emergence is worthy of scholarly attention given the sect's susceptibility to extremism.

Prior attempts by other scholars and journalists to engage in conversations with the Bosnian Salafis have been mostly unsuccessful given that this population serves as a principal recruiting ground for militant groups (Mulholland, 2016). Several hundreds of Bosnian Salafis are estimated to have joined ISIS and other militant organizations, but the exact numbers remain unknown. The sample for this study was collected nationally though there were cities, towns, and villages where dozens of the attempts to speak to a Salafi were unsuccessful. It was impossible to gain access to some of the self-isolating communities.

Semi-structured interviews included over 100 questions, covering the participants' demographic, socioeconomic, religious, and educational profiles, their views on Islam, Salafism, formal and informal education, information access, social norms, values, and beliefs. Audio recordings were analyzed for content and subtle signs of participants' divergence from specific topics. Data was evaluated using content analysis, looking for repeated mentions of terms that have assisted learning and acquisition of the converts' ultraconservative and radical views. No prior scholarship exists on the radicalized Salafis' approach to education in Bosnia.

Education was referred to as inclusive of both formal and informal knowledge production, acquisition, and transfer. But, the questions asked distinguished between the formal education as the dominant social institution, and the informal education in the non-institutional space where mentors, in person or online, influence those seeking alternatives to formal schooling. The interview guide engaged the interviewees with questions, follow up questions, and clarifications to determine their exact path to radicalization.

The interviews with women took place in the presence of a male family member as interviews with women alone were not allowed. All interviews were recorded in Bosnian, encrypted, and carefully transcribed, with a special focus on the trends in language, views, and paths towards radicalization but also on any changes in tone, mood, or aversion to a specific question. For instance, there was often a sense of secrecy during the exchanges relating to the mentors who facilitated the radicalization process. When asked to share more about her mentor, a Salafi woman said the question "irritates me. All you need to know is that I am a true believer. I do not want to disclose their names. All you need to know is that they call for good things to be done" (TZ001).

The study shows that Salafis have mastered a personalized mentorship-centered approach to spread radical ideas. The Salafi mentors, recruiters, or influencers played key roles in deepening the radicalization of the interviewed Salafis and were held in high esteem by the converts. Some Salafi converts were fully radicalized and intolerant of other Muslims and non-Muslims including even their own family members while some still maintained a level of interactions with and showed respect for non-Salafis. The goal of this analysis is to provide a rare insight into the role of formal and informal education in the radicalization process of Bosnia's Salafis and inform the *educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization* presented in the next section. The study did not explore the globally networked power and money behind the Salafis' radicalization effort in Bosnia, but the financial support of Salafi converts came up inadvertently. The Salafi mentees lacked the understanding of the external funding network behind the spread of Salafism.

Beyond understanding a small segment of the Bosnian population that has endorsed Salafism, the larger study dissected how and why some Bosnians have moved toward greater religiosity following the genocide against Bosnian Muslims. As previously discussed, targeting of a group increases that group's propensity toward religiosity and search for the alternative spaces of acceptance and belonging outside schools and classrooms. But, how precisely that shift occurs in Bosnia and what role education plays are the central questions of the larger study.

## 5. Findings and analysis: the educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization

The study sequences the Salafi radicalization in a new *educational displacement and replacement model* (Fig. 1) using the empirical data from the in-depth interviews with 20 Salafi converts. They recognize an inherent relationship between power, elites, corruption, and institutions and thus question the value and intent of the formal education. For them, formal education is no different than other mainstream institutions perpetuating *status quo*, compelling them to search for reformation and transformation in alternative spaces, which is where Salafism resides. Salafism is the ideological bent within Islam that is ultraconservative and thus more susceptible to radicalization.

All converts acknowledge a diminished role of educators, schools, and mosques, which they gradually *replace* with the informal religious

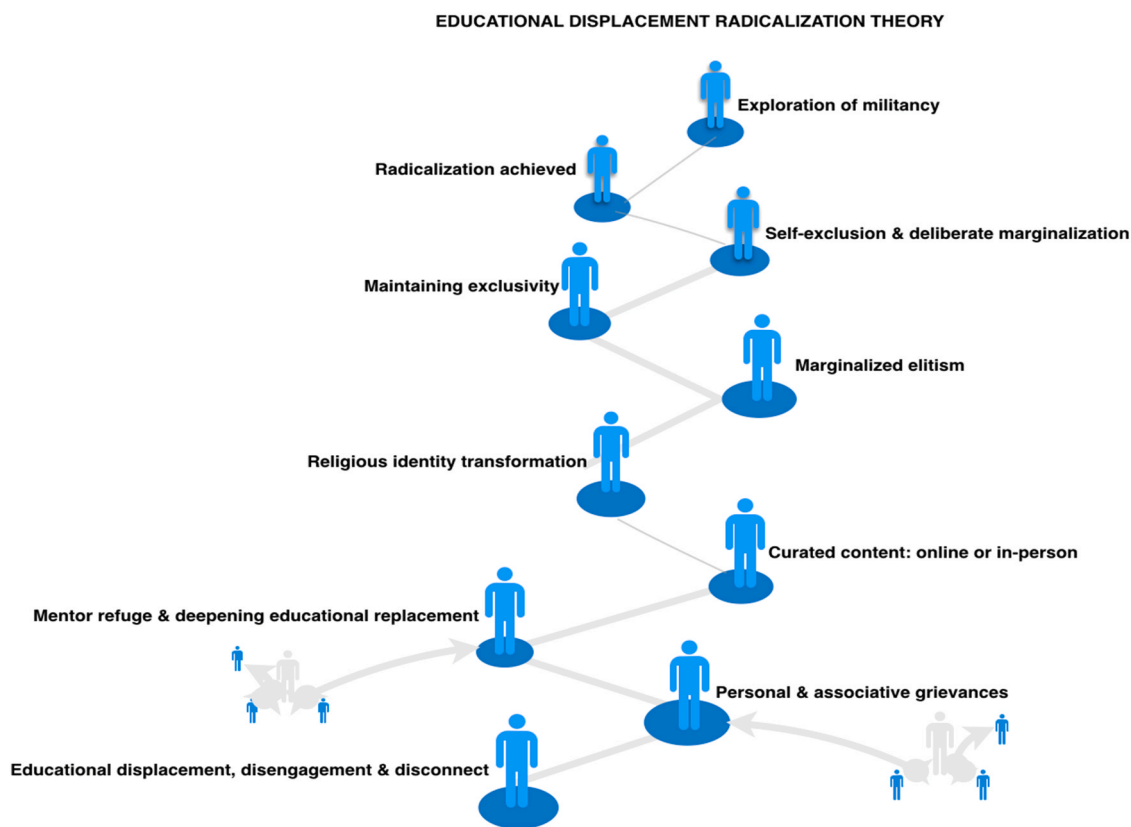**EDUCATIONAL DISPLACEMENT RADICALIZATION THEORY**



Fig. 1. Educational displacement and replacement radicalization model.

mentors who become their trusted teachers, friends, and respected ideological guides. Mosques as formal religious spaces lose relevance once an individual is drawn into the alternative Salafi learning spaces. The radicalization process (Fig. 1) therefore begins with the *educational displacement* from formal institutions where individuals first experience the lack of belonging, recognition, and engagement. This sense of displacement that alienates them from the classroom, their teachers, and peers early in life is magnified by either personal or referential grievances. The *educational displacement* is nuanced and can affect even top performers in schools and universities, but one shared feature is a sense of exclusion, invisibility, and lack of belonging. The radicalizing recruiters leverage *educational displacement* by offering to replace formal teachers and diminish the influence of schools. The informal mentors provide refuge (Fig. 1) and begin by deepening loyalty and trust with their mentees along with propagating their ideological position - in this case religious purity and morality - via social media platforms and in person.

In a vacuum left by the formal education, the Salafi mentors provide continuing education for the marginalized through mentorship-based clinics, online programming, podcasts, and physical lectures. While mosques have some relevance as the initial meeting places, the radicalization process transpires in informal spaces. One Salafi declares: "the most important for me have been religious conferences where I meet those who studied Islam abroad, whose work and discipline are impressive. They provoke feelings in me" (ZI043). Salafi mentors deploy their rigid interpretation of Islam, veiled in secrecy, and through one-on-one relationships supported by curated content online (Fig. 1). In doing so, they are the gatekeepers to the unique and personalized radicalization process. As ZI043 goes on to share, "We have no TV, only internet and phone so we can *control* [emphasis added] information that comes into our house. I do not read newspapers because of pictures and immorality."

With their intentional teaching, Salafi mentors are the locus of this

*educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization* that begins with the youths' sense of *displacement* from the formal education (Fig. 1) – an educational void that the radicalizing mentors from the informal spaces readily fill. A Salafi woman says: "Educational institutions had no influence on me" (KO22). Her conversion into Salafism did not take place in a mosque, but at home when she married her husband and had a mentor "who instructed [her] on what to do, and on what is right."

When individuals feel *educationally displaced* relative to others, the disfranchised self-initiate search for the alternative source of empowerment and belonging. Those alternatives percolate through the informal educational spaces and are offered by mentors (Fig. 1) who further transition the vulnerable into the societal outskirts. The study finds some Muslims express frustration with the exclusion, inequity, and deprivation they had experienced while living in the West relative to the non-Muslim majorities in the Western European societies while others feel deprived as compared to the corrupt elites in their local environment even if those elites are predominantly Muslim. For instance, ZI043, a married father of three, returned from Germany "because the story of West, the story that media tells us is not true." A young married Salafi woman living in Bosnia similarly recognizes: "Majority does not want to accept us, they do not want our social norms and behaviors (KO22)." These differing types of deprivations and grievances are not mutually exclusive. Instead, personal grievances are often combined with *referential grievances* (Fig. 1), where local Muslims connect their personal exclusion to the exclusion of Muslims globally. As KO22 points out: "There is injustice towards us Muslims, and I do not like to be made fun of for what I wear. Allah ordered me to wear niqab, not wear heels, not wear jewelry. I walk out and do not react to their ridiculing of me." These grievances serve as a connective tissue that uniquely positions the aggrieved to feel *educationally displaced*.

Either real or perceived, personal grievances are often collectivized under a narrative of victimhood. As earlier discussed, the Serb

nationalists justified the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in 1990 s by fictionalizing stories of Muslims as feeding Serb children to animals in Sarajevo's zoo (Zulic, 2018). For the radicalization purposes, it is irrelevant whether these victimhood narratives and associated grievances have credence or not. What matters is the perception by the aggrieved. For instance, in the case of some interviewees, their experience of anti-Muslim racism, exclusion, and marginalization in the Western settings, whether real or perceived, has motivated them to turn to the radicalizing spaces.

While many explore radicalization, not all radicalize. The Salafi model has 5 key defining controls aimed at securing its success: *language control, information/knowledge control, trust control, relationship control,* and *guidance control* (Fig. 2). These controls allow Salafi recruiters to construct and deploy exclusionary narratives to invalidate non-Salafi viewpoints. As others have shown, language can build social prejudice to solidify one's own power and credibility (Quasthoff, 1989; Chilton, 2004; Holly, 1989; Wodak, 1989). Through *language control*, Salafi mentors define beliefs, norms, and behaviors that are acceptable and moral. They also develop a narrative that controls who enters their mentees' circles and who is to be trusted (*trust control*). One of the Salafi converts reveals, "I do not trust newspapers, only my mentors and religious sites I visit online" (KO23).

Another argues, "It is more important *who* says it than *what* is said" (ZI043). Mentors curate content for the new converts, who learn how to navigate the approved sources and other go-to platforms which gives them control over knowledge creation and informal learning (*knowledge/information control*). The interviewed Salafis feel other-ed by their negative portrayal in the mainstream media. Their mentors actively discredit the mainstream sources of information (*knowledge/information control*) and maintain the Salafi version of Islam as the only true Islam: for them, Salafism is "the *only correct* and *valid* [emphasis added] way to follow Islam" (Interviewee TZ003). Salafi mentors control information and knowledge that a new convert to Salafism is exposed to.

With a mentor becoming a close confidant (*guidance control*) that builds a new paradigm for the mentee, the mentor also exerts power over relationships that are acceptable or not within that new world. Consequently, the interactions between Salafis and non-Salafis infrequently occur, further limiting Salafis' exposure to diverse viewpoints and at times even their interactions with family (*relationship control*). All 5 controls (Fig. 2) ought to be maintained throughout the entire radicalization process to ensure its successful completion.

a. A Ten-Step Pathway to Extremism Begins with Educational Displacement

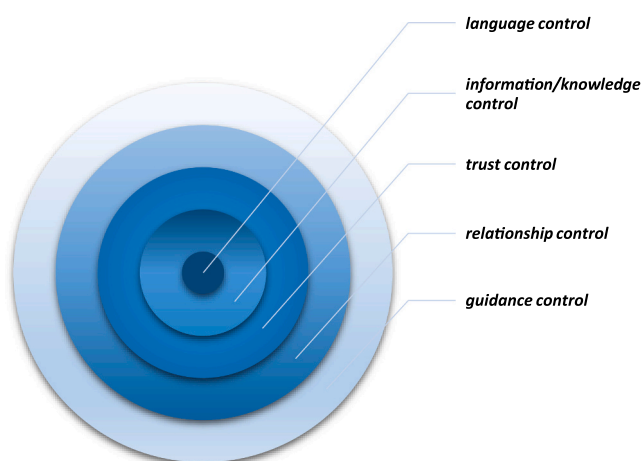Education is a process of gaining a perspective on the world that has

**Fig. 2.** Radicalization narrative control model.

been historically formalized through the establishment of schools and systems of schools. As the first spaces where children learn about themselves and world around them, schools institutionally monopolize framing of the "truth regimes" (Foucault, 1975). These truth regimes inform paradigms, knowledge, and norms guiding human behaviors. While contemporary Salafis aspire to mirror Islam's first followers in their values and behaviors, Salafis greatly depart from early Muslims during the Islam's Golden Age when the scientific inquiry and critical thinking were deemed Allah's directive (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a). The present day Salafis view religious knowledge as superior to other forms of knowledge while early Muslims interpreted Allah's word as his instruction to reinforce belief via reason and vice versa (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a). This positionality of the religious and scientific knowledge as equally valuable fueled early Muslims' developments of algebra, astronomy, optics, engineering, and poetry (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a). Today, Salafis wrongly argue that "first comes religion and then other education" and they would eliminate "mother nature, art, and music" from the curriculum (KO23). This perspective reflects the much later traditionalist current in Islam that favors the strict following of religion, but does not reflect the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of early Muslims (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a).

Educational systems are hierarchical and preferential to standardization and distinct structure of power. Learning in formal institutions therefore lacks a personalized touch that Salafis provide via informal education. As ZI043 shares, "After one wild night, I met one man who advised me that night and brought me back to faith." The dominant narratives in schools typically align with the elites' perspectives in the societies, so what occurs in the classroom tends to mirror broader societal paradigms, preferences, dominance, and knowledge (Interviewee ZE15). In such context, *educational displacement* (Fig. 1) of the marginalized can occur. "In our schools nothing is learned that should be learned. To be honest, I finished only one year of high-school and dropped out" (KO23), which characterizes the sentiment of some interviewed Salafi converts. This *educational displacement* is the first step that opens the door for Salafi mentors to replace the formal schooling.

It is not their commitment to Salafism that first draws the vulnerable in; it is *first* that the mainstream education system pushes them towards the alternatives within which the threads of the ultraconservative Salafism reside. One Bosnian Salafi (ZE15) details: "I am my own education and educational institutions had no influence on me. I relied on mentors for learning rather than school." A door to radicalization is first opened when educators and schools do not provide students with opportunities to engage in tough conversations and constructively address their grievances. Another Salafi (TZ 003) discusses factors affecting his grievances with formal education:

"All teachers are not fair when examining students or transferring knowledge, and a lot can be done to improve that perhaps to make sure they are more collegial, more caring, to show more love for their job in the moment *when they need to tackle complicated topics with us* [emphasis added]. Of course, there are many failings particularly *when it comes to cheating and corruption in education* [emphasis added]".

Feeling unfairly treated, ignored, or being pushed out of the classroom motivates students to turn to radical alternatives. After youths disengage in the classrooms, they seek to *replace* the mainstream education with the alternatives. Schools become unimportant and informal education takes over because once "you enter [Salafism], you have to know the rules" (Interviewee SA38). Young people search for a sense of belonging and explore various options. A Salafi interviewee explains (TZ003) that he was unable to find answers to questions of purpose to his life in school, so: "I spent time learning about Jehovah's Witnesses while I was a teen, then Bible, both Old and New Testament, but I found it all illogical to me."

Within the alternative space, the extremists' recruiters actively offer,

in person or online, the *educational replacement.* A Salafi interviewee details how he left not only formal education but also a religious school he was attending for 12 years and instead joined online Salafi lectures for the past 5.5 years (KO23). For the educationally marginalized, these alternative spaces offer, as Foucault would argue, a pathway to challenge power in hope to capture some power. Whenever the conformity is undermined, an individual can become more susceptible to criminal and extremist behavior (Schils and Pauwels, 2014). But, it is an avenue to inclusion and meaningful life that at first these individuals hope to find.

The *educational displacement* is exacerbated by the individual experiencing either personal or referential grievances (Fig. 1). Some are economically deprived. A Salafi woman specifies that she is unable to find a job because she experiences discrimination for wearing *niqab*; her exclusion is further compounded by her feeling that the formal education has ostracized her as a minority and adversely impacted opportunities for her young sons (TZ001). Others view political elites and institutions as corrupt (SA38). If those grievances cannot be explored by critically engaging in schools, some students will look for answers outside schools.

With the West's ownership of the ideological narrative of democracy, multi-ethnicity, meritocracy, progress, modernity, and statehood, *educationally displaced* Muslims turn to the one ideological platform Muslims can both readily claim and easily access - Islam. *Educationally displaced* and marginalized Muslims on their pathway to radicalization often romanticize the Golden Age when the Islamic Caliphate was most prosperous and early Muslims emerged. While Islam then was defined by its openness to diverse knowledge and espousal of scientific innovation (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020a), the Salafi recruiters today position the narrative of scientific and educational progress and innovation as inherently Western or corrupt by the Western interests. This worldview disengages radicalizing youths from formal education and instead limits the most vulnerable youths to the radicalizing mentors who monopolize the informal learning spaces. "They approached me with nice things… Mentors are most influential for me" (KO23).

Mentors (Fig. 1) are seen as learned men who are devout Muslims and knowledgeable about the Qur'an, often educated in the Middle East. A college-educated, unemployed Salafi shared that he had no formal education on Islam, but benefited from his mentors who "studied in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt" (Interviewee TZ003). This reiterates the salience of controlling the knowledge, but also the relevance of the *trust control* through which the formal education is delegitimized in lieu of knowledge coming from the Salafi mentors educated at the source. Interviewees never mentioned that these mentors were employed by an institution or compensated for their work. But, mentors were deemed to be of the highest status as the sole, trusted, and personable guides to true knowledge (*guidance control*). Al-Ghazali who propagated a traditionalist perspective in Islam similarly argued in the 12th century (Günther, 2006): teachers in Islam are expected to teach without compensation and solely for the benefit of spreading Islam.

Mentorship is indispensable to radicalizing the *educationally displaced* (Fig. 1) and through *relationship control* gradually replaces teaching and learning in the mainstream education. One of the interviewees (SA38) acknowledged he searched for the alternatives to the formal schooling and first endorsed other branches of Islam until he heard a lecture by a well-known Bosnian Salafi influencer, Dr. Safet Kuduzovic. Mentors fill the vacuum left by the formal education systems with a caring and inclusive yet rigid and skewed interpretation of Islam to galvanize the lost and marginalized. They evoke the quixotic memories of the Islamic caliphate during Islam's Golden Age.

In lieu of formal education, the mentor's *guidance control* over educationally displaced is necessity on the path towards radicalization. The new era of digital access brings a challenge to the rigid and static educational systems (Sabic-El-Rayess and Joshi, 2022): technology has created competing virtual spaces of learning with the Salafi mentors offering podcasts and video lectures via social media. A Salafi convert explains: "I have wide network of Facebook friends who publish

information I am interested in…We only read what we need to self-educate." Twitter alone accounts for about 40% of all extremist traffic online (Frampton et al., 2017). The Salafi mentors, often referred to by the Salafi converts as "friends", help them navigate the online content (*information/knowledge control*). In addition to learning from mentors, "I also learned a lot about Salafism through books, catalogues, lectures, and Internet" (KO23). The informal lectures and community gatherings are venues where radicalization is solidified (SA38). With the helping hand of their mentors, individuals are guided through the online content that is selective and curated (Fig. 1) to deepen their *educational replacement.*

Some Salafi mentors garner large social media followings and stream their lectures to large groups in Bosnia: "I explored Sufism before settling on Salafism after listening to a lecture by Safet Kuduzovic [a charismatic Salafi preacher]" (SA38). Occasionally, to further one's marginalization, these mentors contrast Islam with all that is perceived as Western, including formalized education. An interviewee (KO023) purports teaching democracy is problematic because it suggests that "power belongs to people when power belongs only to Allah."

Under the direction of a mentor, new converts are eventually guided (*guidance control*) through a complete religious transformation (Fig. 1) where "You have to disown all unbelievers" (KO23), which for this radicalizing Salafi includes both other Muslims and non-Muslims. All interviewed Salafis believe that their conversion to Salafism was their turn towards morality and ethical behavior: "Islam teaches ethical behavior so nothing bad can be learned from Islam. Islam has expanded because of its beauty not its sword." (SA38).

The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) explains how an event or grievance in one's life can trigger transformative learning, a process where an affected individual deconstructs their old self and constructs a new self to make sense of the world. As some convert into Salafism, they self-reflect and religiously transform (Fig. 1). Many were not observant Muslims in the past: "Before the war [in Bosnia], I drank too much and I lied sometimes, but after the war I turned to faith…It was only during the war in 1992 that I turned to religion more, slowly, when they were killing us…now religion is my life" (ZE15). Others note that their experience of religious transformation was about achieving internal sense of satisfaction, peace, and belonging that nothing else could provide:

> "A person seeks something in life and cannot understand what that is, it pressures you in the chest to seek some satisfaction and at times it is the pleasure of money, or cars, not to even speak of women, but even when you get all of that you are still unhappy until you meet your faith, concretely Islam…until the person enters for the first time into a mosque, prays for the first time and hears the first prayer or the words of imam and recognizes how his heart softens. That is what attracts a person, one feels the strength of something beautiful, even if he doesn't know exactly how it shapes him (TZ004)."

As they religiously transform, the new Salafi converts begin to build a sense of elitism even if only within the marginalized circles (Fig. 1). Their new moral framework gives them a feeling of belonging to the *marginalized elite.* They are empowered for the first time. A Salafi woman (TZ001) shares:

> "We are treated differently because we behave differently. We have our own code of behavior. Different way of life. Most people today live without rules and we do not. It is Allah's order to be obedient, dress and behave accordingly. We cover not to be attacked, but to differentiate ourselves from others."

This newfound identity yields a feeling of superiority, higher status, and self-acceptance relative to non-believers. Another Salafi (TZ003) confides:

"There is a distance between a person who takes on these moral values and begins to compare himself to others. I see a chasm where others cheat, behave poorly, and do not maintain moral behavior, not even close to what Islam prescribes. On occasion, I look up to others I envy for their nice behavior. So there is a big chasm between what I find acceptable as traits, norms, and behaviors and what I see in my immediate surroundings."

Most converts say that even if they thought they were Muslim before, they actually never were until they converted into Salafism. Though they do not label themselves as Salafis, but true Muslims.

The next step that is essential to one's complete radicalization is self-isolation that at times means exclusion of family and friends (Fig. 1) if they could jeopardize one's exclusive relationship with the radicalizing circle of friends and mentors. A number of interviewed Salafis noted that their circles of family and friends narrowed as they became more religious. If this exclusivity is maintained, self-isolation and self-marginalization deepen (Sabic-El-Rayess and Marsick, 2021). They become deliberate acts. Consequently, the radicalization is successfully achieved. Once fully radicalized, the individual is more likely to explore terrorism.

## 6. Conclusion

This nuanced analysis introduced a novel *educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization*. *Educational displacement* occurs in a larger societal context when individuals encounter prevailing societal narratives in educational system about themselves and society around them, which for some can be marginalizing and trigger feelings of exclusion, invisibility, and underrepresentation in the mainstream curriculum and narrative in education. *Educational displacement* occurs in classrooms and ultimately, for some, initiates the quest for alternative spaces of belonging and empowerment, within which the radicalization threads often reside. These encounters with exclusion and othering awaken grievances and frustrations that aid radicalization. At the core of this radicalization model is an informal teacher and a mentor who guides the vulnerable individuals through the multi-step radicalization process. While the *educational displacement and replacement model of radicalization* was developed based on the primary data collected within the Salafi community in the post-war Bosnia, the model provides a starting point for further study of *educational displacement* and radicalization elsewhere.

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