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It's back to the drawing board

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Diplomacy hasn't stopped the militant brand of Islam, nor has invasion. But, as Mark Trevelyan reports, a German security agency has discovered a novel approach: the cartoon.

In 2004, the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) ran a comic strip campaign against right-wing extremism starring Andi, a schoolboy who stands up against xenophobia and racism.

The strip was so popular that, last October, the Government plunged Andi into a second adventure with his Muslim girlfriend, Ayshe, and her brother, Murat, who comes under the influence of a radical friend and Islamist "hate preacher".

The comic aims to show young people the difference between peaceful mainstream Islam and the violent, intolerant version peddled by militants. At least 100,000 copies have been printed and distributed to every secondary school in Germany's most populous state.

"We were always careful not to hurt feelings and anger people by painting a caricature of Islam," Hartwig Moeller, head of the NRW interior ministry's department for protection of the constitution, said.

"We had to make clear we weren't aiming against Muslims, but only those people who want to misuse Islam for political aims."

The cartoon, featuring boldly drawn Japanese manga-style figures, is designed to be used in citizenship and religion lessons for schoolchildren aged 12 to 16.

"We have learned from our opponents. This is exactly the age at which the Islamists are trying, through Koranic schools and other means, to fill young people with other values," said Mr Moeller, who, despite his intelligence role, estimates half his time is spent educating the public about threats.

The unusual program is one example of how countries around the world are searching for new ways to prevent young people from being drawn into Islamist violence.

Many security analysts speak of the need to counter the "narrative" of al-Qaeda - the message that the West is waging war on Islam in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan and that young Muslims must fight back, including, if necessary, by sacrificing themselves as "martyrs".

Some youngsters find a sense of identity, belonging and justice in al-Qaeda, experts say, not to mention adventure and a sense of "coolness". The question is how to compete with that allure.

Police and governments in most Western European countries have developed outreach programs to build dialogue with Muslim communities, but some believe a bolder approach is called for.

At a conference last month in Stockholm, Swedish terrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp cited the example of Ahmad Dhani, an Indonesian rock star who challenged militant ideology in a massively popular album called *Warriors Of Love (Laskar Cinta, in Indonesian)*.

Since the album's launch in November 2004, the slogan *No To The Warriors Of Jihad, Yes To The Warriors Of Love!*, has spread throughout Indonesia, reports LibforAll, a website dedicated to "promoting the culture of liberty and tolerance worldwide".

The album quickly rose to the top of the charts as millions of young Indonesians embraced its message of love, peace and tolerance.

Not surprisingly, religious extremists - horrified to see their indoctrination of young Muslims into the culture of jihad undermined so effectively - have condemned Dhani and publicly accused him of heresy, LibforAll reports.

Asked on national television about the difference between Laskar Jihad and *Laskar Cinta*, the singer replied: "The first group spreads hatred for one's fellow man, while the second spreads love for all humanity. Any Indonesian who thinks healthily will agree that what I'm saying is true."

Asked why he had called his album *Laskar Cinta*, he said: "To fill the emptiness of Laskar Jihad and spread the virus of [spiritual] love among the young generation."

Mr Ranstorp said: "I'm not suggesting that we need a musical jihad against extremism in Europe, or that we employ MTV in our efforts." But, he asked: "How do we harness humour, soap opera and our tremendous public relations industries in these efforts to disarm the extremists' messages and influence over young people?"

Singers, actors, sport stars and other role models could play an important part in deterring young people from terrorism, said Richard Barrett, a United Nations official who heads a task force studying counter-radicalisation and rehabilitation programs around the world.

"I think that is something we should be looking at - trying to identify these alternative influences and have them speak out against terrorism ... Being cool is a very important part of it all," he said.

That is also the approach of the German cartoon strip. It uses a medium that grabs children's imagination to get its message across more effectively.

"If you're serious about getting through to young people, you have to choose a style that they'll take in their hands and accept, that's how the comic came about," said Thomas Grumke, the German official in NRW who thought up the original Andi idea.

"A comic can go much further than a normal text. There's a great deal more room to play with, more room for interpretation."

Muslim reaction to Andi has been positive, although with reservations.

"We found the basic approach was right and good. We only regretted [the authorities] didn't tell us about this initiative in advance, then it could have been made much better," Aiman Mazyek, general secretary of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, said.

He said the portrayal of the Islamist hate preacher was “a bit overdone” but added: “There are people like that. I can’t say there aren’t.”

Copies of the comic have been distributed in mosques, he said.

Another regional Government, Hamburg, is also using the Andi story, and there has been interest from Austria, Denmark, Japan and the United States.

Mr Moeller believes the comic, which cost just €30,000 (\$47,440) to make, could help some Muslim youngsters to recognise and resist Islamist recruitment attempts.

“If I get through to someone this way, and it makes him more critical of people who want to make him a jihadist, then I’ve stopped him at some point committing terrorist attacks or going to a terrorist camp in Afghanistan or Pakistan,” Mr Moeller said.

“Maybe he won’t slide off into this milieu - that’s the idea.”