

Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism

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rapporteurs

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Cover Photo: A German Neo-Nazi shouts during a march through the streets of downtown Berlin, October 3, 2001. © REUTERS/Corbis Kai Pfaffenbach.

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Executive Summary

Many scholars have noted the cyclical nature of terrorist movements. Yet, little attention has been paid to the ways in which such groups come to an end or move away from violence of their own accord. Similarly, though much current attention has focused on the process of radicalization and the espousal of violent extremism, Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan argue that insufficient attention has been paid to the other end of the spectrum: the factors which prompt individual and collective *withdrawal* from violent extremist or radical¹ groups—i.e., the processes of **disengagement** and **deradicalization**. Disengagement refers to a behavioral change, such as leaving a group or changing one's role within it. It does not necessitate a change in values or ideals, but requires relinquishing the objective of achieving change through violence. Deradicalization, however, implies a cognitive shift—i.e., a fundamental change in understanding.

Furthermore, it has been argued that, cumulatively, such processes can have a positive impact on global counterterrorism efforts by promoting the internal fragmentation of violent radical groups and by delegitimizing their rhetoric and tactics in the eyes of the broader public. To this end, Bjørgo and Horgan have edited a volume gathering together research, analyses, and case studies on processes of disengagement from violent extremism, as well as descriptions and assessments of global initiatives facilitating withdrawal from violent extremist groups.

This report draws on their work and reflects the discussions at a conference on “Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” hosted by the International Peace Institute and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on April 22, 2008, in New York City. Bringing together a wide range of perspectives from the academic, diplomatic, and practitioner communities in New York, this conference generated an engaging discussion on the impact of disengagement and deradicalization programs on global counterterrorism efforts and informed the ongoing work of the UN in this area.

Researchers at the conference described various initiatives, including those undertaken in Europe, Southeast Asia, Colombia, and Saudi Arabia, which are detailed below. Furthermore, the report notes a number of innovative programs in, for example, Yemen and Qatar, which have sought creative solutions to the challenge of radicalization within their societies.

Although research into violent groups in various countries was conducted discretely, researchers noted common patterns which arose among the factors encouraging disengagement from violent extremism. Among these were familial and social influences; frustration with the group's leadership or tactics; and longing for a “normal” civilian life separate from clandestine activities and the threat of punitive actions by law enforcement. Consequently, whether discussing white supremacist groups or jihadist terrorists, disengagement and deradicalization were encouraged by many similar factors, beginning for many with the experience of trauma and a subsequent “cognitive opening,” disillusionment, revulsion, or stress, and further facilitated by education, social and economic assistance, and counseling.

This has important implications for the work of the United Nations in countering terrorism and violent radicalism. These patterns highlight the value of a cross-fertilization of ideas among different regional and ideological groups; for example, lessons learned in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia may be applied in Europe, and the experiences of Irish Republicans may tell us much about jihadists in Southeast Asia. However, the research team also noted that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model; terrorism is often context-specific and, therefore, the local environment and culture must impact the format of such initiatives. Still, these findings also indicate great value in broad cooperative initiatives to share experiences, program designs, research, and analysis among UN Member States, especially those countries grappling with the challenge of violent extremism or terrorism.

Although the UN might not be a central actor in many of these programs, which are mostly the result of national initiatives, it could provide the

¹ For purposes of this report, “radical” refers to the possession of extremist views and a willingness to use violence in the pursuit of extremist, racist, or political objectives.

mechanisms for transmitting lessons learned from one country to another and assist states in the development of their own programs. Given its universal state membership, its access to international expertise, and its convening power, participants at the conference suggested key roles in which the United Nations could contribute to facilitating disengagement and deradicalization initiatives:

- *Collating best practices and information sharing*

By drawing on its convening capacity, the United Nations and its partners can collect and disseminate insights, best practices, and lessons learned to inform the initiatives of Member States and relevant organizations.

- *Facilitating cooperative relationships and capacity development*

The UN can also empower and facilitate regional and cross-regional cooperative mechanisms among counterterrorism practitioners and state representatives. One product from such a series of exchanges might be a compendium or manual derived from states' collated best practices and experiences in setting up a disengagement or deradicalization program.

- *Developing standards and benchmarks*

The mapping exercise currently being undertaken by the Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force's Working Group on "radicalization and extremism that leads to terrorism" may be developed into a series of standards and benchmarks that states and their programs might use to measure success.

- *Capacity-building assistance for criminal justice systems*

Arms of the United Nations, such as the

Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), perform roles that supplement the UN's counterterrorism efforts by transmitting technical knowledge and assistance. Their expertise in legal, judicial, and criminal matters may be drawn upon by states seeking to develop deradicalization and disengagement programs.

- *Norm-setting and media outreach*

In many subject areas, such as human rights, decolonization, and child combatants, the UN has served as a setter of international norms. This role could be further extended to set international standards and norms delegitimizing the use of violence against noncombatants and highlight the negative impact of violent extremism on families and societies, bolstered by a strong and vocal commitment from a cross-regional coalition of UN Member States.

As Terje Pedersen, Norway's Deputy Minister of Justice and the Police, noted, discussions about terrorism and the broader understanding of it have come a long way since September 11, 2001, but there is yet much to learn regarding long-term prevention. This discussion was intended therefore not only to inform the work of the UN and its Member States, but also to encourage further research and analysis of the processes and drivers of individual and collective disengagements. This will help states to better understand how these processes relate to their counterterrorism strategies and capacities. The UN, with its role in facilitating knowledge exchange and providing technical assistance, may be a vital element in a truly holistic and transnational approach to the challenge of violent extremism.

Introduction

Terrorist movements have been recognized by many scholars to be cyclical in nature, yet little attention has been paid to the ways in which they have declined and eventually come to an end. Similarly, while much current attention has focused on the process of radicalization and the espousal of violent extremism, little research has examined the reverse mechanism—deradicalization or “disengagement.” While the reasons for this latter process may be related to why a person becomes radicalized, there are often a number of other elements that can strengthen the resolve of a militant to disengage or withdraw from violent activism. Cumulatively, it has been argued, such processes can have a positive impact on global counterterrorism efforts by promoting the internal fragmentation of violent radical groups and by delegitimizing their rhetoric and tactics in the eyes of the broader public.

To this end, Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan have edited a volume gathering together research, analyses, and case studies of the processes of disengagement as well as descriptions and assessments of global initiatives facilitating the withdrawal by members from violent extremist groups. The edited volume, entitled, “Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement,” is to be published by Routledge in December 2008 and includes chapters by Zachary Abuza, Rogelio Alonso, Richard Barrett, Shazadi Beg, Laila Bokhari, Christopher Boucek, Audrey Kurth Cronin, Donatella della Porta, Jaap van Donselaar, Sara Grunenber, Diah Rashwan, Marcella Ribetti, as well as the two editors.

This report draws on this work and reflects the discussions at a conference on “Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” hosted by the International Peace Institute and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on April 22, 2008, in New York City. Bringing together a wide range of perspectives from the academic, diplomatic, and practitioner communities in New York, this conference generated an engaging discussion on the



Panelists Terje M. Pedersen, Edward C. Luck, and Robert Orr.

impact of disengagement and deradicalization programs on global counterterrorism efforts and informed the ongoing work of the UN in this area. Many national counterterrorism practitioners from UN Member States, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Norway, and Sweden, shared insights based on their experiences and national initiatives, as did representatives of UN bodies such as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the “1267 Committee” of the Security Council, as well as the UN Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), and a number of policy research institutions. It was opened with addresses by Mr. Terje M. Pedersen (Deputy Minister of Justice and the Police, Norway), Professor Edward Luck (Senior Vice President and Director of Studies, IPI), and Dr. Robert Orr, (Chairman, CTITF). Additionally, sessions were chaired by Mr. Richard Barrett (Coordinator, 1267 Committee), Ambassador Neven Jurica (representing Croatia), Ambassador Abdullah Al-Saidi (representing Yemen), and Ambassador Hamidon Ali (representing Malaysia).

Although terrorism is not a new subject on the UN agenda, the events of September 11, 2001, and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1373, with a Chapter VII mandate, opened a new phase of activism on this subject in multilateral fora. Subsequent attacks on the United Nations in

Iraq and Algeria have made it impossible for the organization to observe the debate as a passive actor. In spite of seemingly intractable negotiations over the definition of terrorism, in September 2006 the General Assembly adopted the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by consensus. Momentous for its achievement of broad cross-regional acceptance, it condemned "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, as it constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security."² It was also remarkable for its inclusion of directives to address "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism" and human rights within its recommendations. Established to coordinate UN organs and affiliates in implementing the Strategy, the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force established a series of Working Groups to facilitate implementation of the Strategy in particular subject areas. Among these is a Working Group on "radicalization and extremism that leads to terrorism," co-led by the UN Monitoring team of the 1267 Committee, the Executive Office of the Secretary General, and United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI).

However, Bjørge and Horgan argue that while radicalization has garnered much attention among academics and policymakers, insufficient attention has been paid to the other end of the spectrum: the factors which prompt individual and collective *withdrawal* from violent extremist or radical groups—the processes of **disengagement** and **deradicalization**. Although acknowledging that such initiatives must be one element within a more comprehensive counterterrorism program, they point out that the willingness of key participants to turn states witness against violent groups, the reduction in numbers of potential recruits through media campaigns featuring ex-participants, and the reduction in size of violent groups through defections can have a significant impact on the capacity and durability of an extremist or terrorist movement. These are, however, medium- to long-term goals and will need to complement short-term

counterterrorism measures, including incarcerating and incapacitating key actors, deterring violent groups, and the prevention of imminent attacks.

Disengagement and Deradicalization from Violent Extremism

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Audrey Cronin noted that, from a historical perspective, terrorism has been cyclical. Terrorist movements have ended due to a number of factors, including "decapitation" (or removal of a leader); the inability of a group to pass on its values to the next generation; the participation of the group in political processes or negotiations; the loss of public support; or the achievement—or perceived achievement—of the group's objectives.³ Cronin and Horgan both pointed out that there has been too little attention devoted to this phase of terrorist activity, often because groups are considered irrelevant once deactivated.⁴ However, this is when group members are most willing to speak with researchers and cooperate with the state. Consequently, this process ought to be facilitated through holistic counterterrorist activities which include understanding not only radicalization and



Audrey Kurth Cronin poses a question.

2 United Nations, "Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," September 2006, available at www.un.org/terrorism/strategy-counter-terrorism.shtml.

3 Also outlined in Jon B. Alterman, "How Terrorism Ends," special report no.48 (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace [USIP], 1999).

4 See also John Horgan, "Psychological Factors Related to Disengaging from Terrorism: Some Preliminary Assumptions and Assertions," *A Future for the Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, Cheryl Benard, ed., RAND's Initiative on Middle East Youth Working Paper Series (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, September 2005), available at www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR354.pdf

conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, but also the processes involved in deradicalization and disengagement.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, disengagement and deradicalization refer to two rather different social and psychological processes. Disengagement refers to a behavioral change, such as leaving a group or changing one's role within it. It does not necessitate a change in values or ideals, but requires relinquishing the objective of achieving change through violence. Deradicalization, however, implies a cognitive shift, a fundamental change in understanding. It is often triggered by a traumatic experience which "challenges the coherence of the individual's worldview" and can engender "post-traumatic growth."⁵ A "cognitive opening" which makes an individual receptive to new ideas, is then created.⁶ This can be seized upon by social and law enforcement services to engage with the individual and persuade them of the error of their previous ways. The language to describe this latter process varies according to political sensitivities of countries, which often favor words like "rehabilitation," "resocialization," or "dialogue" to describe such initiatives.

Bjørge noted that experiences in northern Europe suggested that most youths joined violent right-wing groups in search of social camaraderie and often developed extremist views *after* joining the group. This has been mirrored in the importance of social networks in binding together members of groups like Jemaah Islamiyya (JI), whose loyalty is secured through inter- and intra-familial bonds or marriage.⁷ Consequently, members often leave such groups because of socially-linked "*push*" and "*pull*" factors. The former consist of conditions such as social environment, disillusionment with group leadership or activities, revulsion at violent acts, or stress and exhaustion from living a clandestine life within an illegal extremist group. "Pull" factors include longing for a "normal" life outside the group and can be triggered by increasing age, pressure from partners and families, or desire to engage in

alternative occupations less threatening to long-term socioeconomic prospects.⁸

As with radicalization, leaving a terrorist or extremist group is an incremental process and can take place over a significant period of time. Though it may be linked to the reasons prompting radicalization, Horgan argued that the reasons for *becoming* a terrorist, *staying* a terrorist, and then *disengaging* from terrorism were often different and context-specific.⁹ The decision to withdraw from violent extremism may be voluntary, with such a personal decision taken following an assessment of the alternatives available. Alternatively, it may be involuntary, for example, through forced demobilization, incarceration, or death. Disengagement may take place on the individual level or the collective level. Interestingly, it was pointed out that in the case of Colombia, disengagement was more effective when the decision to do so was taken on the individual level, as has been the case with members of the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), than via a collective decision, as was made by the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* or *United Self-defense Forces of Colombia*). Some of the reasons cited for these transformations are listed below:

- (1) personal trauma, such as combat experience or the loss of a friend or colleague due to violent ideologies or hatreds;
- (2) disillusionment with the group's leadership;
- (3) stress of staying with the group/exhaustion of illicit lifestyle;
- (4) desire for a normal "civilian" life, such as through marriage, finding a career, or beginning a family;
- (5) competing social relationships or pressure by family/friends—especially parents and partners/spouses who may use social relationships to highlight "pull" factors.

As described above, many of these transformations take place following a cognitive opening in which a person becomes receptive to alternative worldviews. For example, members of the FARC were disillusioned with leaders who took privileges

5 Renee Garfinkel, "Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace," special report no.186 (Washington, DC: USIP, April 2007), p.11.

6 Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, "Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the challenge of extremist and radicalized prisoners," technical report series (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

7 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

8 See also Benard, "A Future for the Young."

9 See also Horgan, "Psychological Factors Related to Disengaging from Terrorism."

for themselves, such as having romantic partners from within the group accompany them on postings, which were denied to the broader membership. Another example cited was how some members of a white supremacist movement in northern Europe grew disillusioned as their leaders fought over a woman rather than advance that group's cause. Revulsion at extreme acts also facilitates this process, as evidenced by the reaction of JI activist Nasir Abbas, who was shocked by the death of innocents during the Bali bombings in 2002, carried out by people he had trained.¹⁰ Another example is that of Sean O'Callaghan, a former Provisional Irish Republican Army member, who was horrified when a colleague commented on the death of a policewoman from a bomb explosion, "I hope she's pregnant and we get two for the price of one."¹¹

Although research into each of these violent groups was conducted separately and across wide geographical boundaries, Bjørgo and Horgan noted common patterns which arose among the factors encouraging disengagement from violent extremism. Whether discussing white supremacist groups or jihadist terrorists, the processes of disengagement and deradicalization were accelerated for many by the experience of trauma and a subsequent "cognitive opening," disillusionment, revulsion, or stress, and further facilitated by education, social and economic assistance, and counseling.

This has important implications for the work of the United Nations in countering terrorism and radicalization. These patterns highlight the value of a cross-fertilization of ideas among different regional and ideological groups; lessons learned in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia may be applied in Europe, and the experiences of Irish Republicans may tell us much about jihadists in Southeast Asia. However, the research team also noted that there was no "one-size-fits-all" model; terrorism is often context-specific and, therefore, the local environment and culture must impact the format of such initiatives. Still, these findings also indicate the value of broad cooperative initiatives that share program designs, research, analysis, and lessons learned among UN Member States, and especially

among those countries grappling with the challenge of violent extremism or terrorism. In particular, the transnational nature of some of these groups and their ideologies highlights the need for a broad multilateral effort targeting not only the processes of radicalization, but also the means by which it takes place—for example, via the Internet or other media. Additionally, the case studies suggest a close relationship between radical extremists and economic and social marginalization, educational opportunities, human rights, and the rule of law. In each of these issue areas, the UN has had a long history of engagement and, as a forum with universal state membership, possesses a comparative advantage in norm-setting and the facilitation of cooperative and politically efficient relationships.

SPECIFIC PROGRAM CASES

During the conference, participants shared information on program designs, challenges to implementation, and applicability in the face of different shades of violent extremism or radicalism. Many commonalities were apparent—including the important roles played by disillusionment or revulsion, the value of social relationships, and the importance of economic incentives—demonstrating the potential for wide adoption in multiple regions. The following is a brief outline of the programs presented at the conference.

Northern Europe

Devised to facilitate the disengagement of extremist nationalists or "neo-Nazis," *Exit* programs in Europe have demonstrated that innovative and collaborative approaches between social workers, therapists, teachers, and law enforcement agencies can be successful. In spite of a rise in criminal incidents—including arson and murder—that ought to have alerted authorities to the increased activity of extremist groups, authorities did not at first respond with measures to facilitate disengagement. It was largely through the commitment of academics, municipal employees, NGOs, and law enforcement agencies, together with support from families of the target demographic, that disengagement or "Exit" programs were developed—first in Norway, then replicated in Sweden and Germany. The projects, which borrowed heavily from one

10 See also Peter Taylor, "The jihadi who turned supergrass," BBC News, September 13, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/5334594.stm>.

11 Horgan, "Psychological Factors Related to Disengaging from Terrorism."

another in terms of structure and aims, sought to

- (1) aid and support those young people who wanted to disengage from extremist groups;
- (2) provide help and support to families of activists; and
- (3) disseminate knowledge to those in professions that could be of help in curbing the problem.

The Norwegian project worked primarily through local-level agencies, such as municipal agencies and NGOs for youths and children, and successfully trained around 700 people to assist with the program. Significantly, the involvement of parents—often overlooked in programs aimed at thwarting violent groups—proved highly effective in extracting children from the clutches of extremist groups. Moreover, the parents themselves benefited from information sharing with other parents in similar positions. Despite these successes, Bjørge observed that some parents were, in many ways, as extreme in their viewpoints as their children, and were more resistant to the programs' objectives. However, by the close of the Norwegian initiative, the success rate of the parental network groups was approximately 90 percent, indicating that the largely parent-driven initiative had made a decisive impact.

Exit Sweden had objectives similar to the Norwegian program, though it was implemented differently in that it sought to work directly with those who contacted *Exit* on their own initiative; indeed, the voluntary nature of the interaction conferred great credibility on the program. In addition to this component, the Swedish scheme also provides safe houses to those in need of heightened personal security and encourages participants to rebuild friendships and revive their social skills. In Germany, there are multiple initiatives run by both civil society groups or NGOs and the government. Prominent among the latter is the *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution*, highlighted by Bjørge's presentation. The main difference between the NGO programs and the latter type of project lies in the government's capacity to screen and monitor participants. This may also explain the higher failure rate recorded in Germany, as the government has a greater capacity to monitor participants and follow their activities after the program's completion.

Bjørge argued that the success of these Northern

European programs lay in the integration of local-level agencies, like the police, municipalities, and NGOs, into the initiatives. Furthermore, their success was attributed to breaking communication links between the individual and the group, consequently removing them from the temptations of recidivism due to continued association with the same social group that led the individual to engage in violence in the first place.

Colombia

As mentioned above, “push” and “pull” factors, such as the exhaustion and strain of living with a clandestine, extralegal organization, disillusionment with the leadership or cause, and a longing for a “normal” civilian life, contribute to individual decisions to demobilize or disengage from violence. As Marcella Ribetti reported, in the case of *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), these elements were particularly pronounced. The importance of social relationships was again highlighted when group members resented restrictions on romantic relationships that were enforced regarding rank-and-file members but relaxed for the leadership. Such double standards led to widespread disillusionment not only with the leadership but also the validity of the cause and, eventually, created the openings necessary for eventual disengagement. Ribetti noted that the frequent use of punitive measures by the leadership added another layer of discontent to disillusionment among FARC members who chose to disengage individually. This process entailed the relocation of participants to cities distant from their hometowns and the provision of social and economic incentives to provide alternative occupations and reintegrate them into “civilian” social networks—so, in essence, their lives could start anew.

In the case of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), however, disengagement took place on a collective level. Ribetti noted that in this case, it proved less effective as it was not a decision taken by each individual following any personal deliberation, but was taken at the leadership level as a strategic decision to simultaneously relocate large numbers of participants. In addition, it is often difficult to relocate and start afresh in a new town, thus contributing to the lower success-rate in this case as ex-activists continue to remain in close proximity to one another. Indeed, Ribetti noted that

96 percent of those who returned to violent illegal groups had disengaged collectively. Nonetheless, the disengagement processes revealed similar features, including the importance of social ties and economic incentives. With a high proportion of young members and many lacking both literacy and vocational skills, it was vital to find means of reincorporating vulnerable individuals into society in the aftermath of disengagement. Similar risks associated with returning participants to their hometowns were also evident; indeed, this problem has presented itself in a number of cases worldwide.

Despite these obstacles, disengagement appears to have been relatively successful in Colombia. Ribetti credited the successes achieved to date to government initiatives providing both subsidies and, eventually, individualized attention to group members wishing to disengage, in addition to attempts at providing nonviolent conflict resolution mechanisms and alternative employment options. However, the effectiveness of providing alternative occupations also depends on long-term initiatives such as boosting literacy levels and skills among group members.

Although cases of collective disengagement are rare, the Colombian example demonstrates a number of key contributing factors to success, as well as pitfalls to be avoided. Furthermore, it demonstrates that governments, tasked with providing basic services like education and employment, are often best positioned to facilitate disengagement initiatives given their physical presence, the scale of necessary resources, and intimate knowledge of local conditions and key actors.

The Middle East

Several of the programs discussed drew on the Yemeni model of the *Committee for Dialogue* for inspiration. A pioneer program in deradicalization, it was established in 2002 and prioritized dialogue and intellectual debate, and aimed to persuade violent activists or those detained on terrorism charges of the error of their ways and promoted an understanding of Islam that delegitimized violent

extremism. As Judge Hamoud al-Hittar, credited with developing Yemen's innovative program, noted in 2005, "If you study terrorism in the world, you will see that it has an intellectual theory behind it. And any kind of intellectual idea can be defeated by intellect."¹²

The Saudi program echoed these values and prioritized a rehabilitation program using three main tools, "force, money, and ideology." The program, *Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare* ("PRAT"), targets detainees identified as supporting terrorism and has adopted a multipronged approach to dealing with "deviant groups." The primary approach of the government has been to work with doctors, psychologists, and clerics on eroding support for extremist ideologies; famously, a fatwa issued during Ramadan 2007 called for high-profile ideologues to recant their positions. Additionally, a pervasive public information campaign showing the effects of violence on victims has been put in place to lower public support (which has been seen in internet fora and elsewhere) for terrorist rhetoric and tactics.

In addition to such public information measures, the Saudi initiative has an intensive course of study mapped out for members of violent groups. Designed on the presumption that extremism stems from a "mistake" made in interpreting Islam, rather than deliberate support for terrorism, the programs are designed to "reeducate" individuals and promote a more holistic and nonviolent interpretation of religion. A religious subcommittee populated by well respected clerics emphasizing their independence from the government, engages participants in substantive discussion about the true nature of Islam.¹³ In addition, intensive classes are held to assist participants in gaining a more balanced understanding of their religion. This is a far cry from the harder approach of some countries' security mechanisms and "this 'deprogramming' of extremist views of Islam has led to some participants actually breaking down in tears as they realize they have violated their religion's principals through committing violent acts."¹⁴ Certainly, these

12 In Yemen's program, convicted terror offenders sign an agreement with the government, pledging to obey the law and cease violent extremist activity. In return, participants are freed, given money, jobs, and, in some cases, marriages are arranged. See Kathy Gannon, "Yemen Employs New Terror Approach," *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2007; and, Michael Taarnby, "Yemen's Committee for Dialogue: Can Jihadists Return to Society?" *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no.14, July 15, 2005, available at www.jamestown.org/terrorism/

13 It is important to note that this program is not open to those with "blood on their hands" but rather, is directed at those who offer support to terrorist groups in other roles and capacities.

14 See Drake Bennett, "How to Defuse a Human Bomb," *The Boston Globe*, April 13, 2008.

programs have benefited from the counterbalance they provide to other actors' iron fist-type message. They are, a conference attendee remarked, "Saudi solutions to a Saudi problem," and demonstrate the adaptation of lessons learned for a specific cultural context. In tailoring them to Saudi traditions and values, notions of honor about recognizing familial hierarchies are upheld, with family members called on to take responsibility for the program participant. This exemplifies the potential for success in designing context-specific programs based on a broad-based understanding of the processes driving disengagement and deradicalization.

Parallel to this, Chris Boucek highlighted the "*Sakhina*" scheme, in which trained individuals log on to the internet and question the beliefs or submissions of users in radical chat-rooms. In the course of the *Sakhina* campaign, many would-be terrorists have been challenged on the exact nature of their religious choices. Given the importance of the Internet in the counterterrorism field, acknowledged also by the work a CTITF Working Group on that subject, such initiatives raised widespread interest among conference participants. To follow up on these programs, the government in Saudi Arabia plans to open a special court with the mandate of handling terrorism and terrorism-related offences. Such a court would argue ideologically against defendants' actions.

Another initiative that has similarly sought to use intellectual debate and discussions on Islam to challenge extremists' views is the *Doha Debates* in neighboring Qatar.¹⁵ Modeled on the traditional Oxford Union debates where discussions center on a motion—usually controversial—the *Doha Debates* are a unique platform for public discussion on challenging issues in the Arab and Muslim world. Such initiatives allow discussions within the Islamic world on values and beliefs and provide a vital counternarrative to that proposed by most extremist groups, a singularly focused narrative often based on past frustrations, prejudices, and Utopian visions. For example, the forum recently hosted Ed Hussain, controversial deputy director of the Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremist think tank in Britain founded by former activists from radical Islamist groups and dedicated to the



Panelist Tore Bjørgo.

promotion of a more tolerant, intellectually dynamic, and expansive interpretation of Islam which acknowledges the many streams of thought and practice within the Muslim community. Arguing for the motion "This House believes that Muslims are failing to combat extremism," Hussain won the debate by a stunning margin of victory—70 percent of the audience voted in favor—and demonstrated the importance of such vehicles for public expression and debate to encourage intellectual pluralism and deradicalization within the community.

In Egypt, the impact of disengagement on the broader movement was particularly telling, as the decision of one violent group had a direct impact on the choice of another to "disengage" from violent tactics. Until they disengaged, the groups Gama'a al-Islamiyah and "the Jihad" were together responsible for 95 percent of terrorism carried out in Egypt. Diah Rashwan's presentation held that the unexpected decision of both groups to renounce violence in the 1990s turned their tactical decision to renounce violence into a vehicle for intellectual debate on its use in Islam.¹⁶ Triggered by dissatisfaction and fatigue, Gama'a al-Islamiyah's decision had repercussions across the global Jihadi movement and, though outwardly claiming theological reasons for their strategic shift away from violence, the prospect of zero tolerance (and militant retaliation or execution) by the government was a likely contributor to the group's move away from bloody

¹⁵ For detailed information, see www.thedohadebates.com.

¹⁶ Although Diah Rashwan was unable to attend the conference, his presentation on Egypt's programs was delivered by proxy.

tactics. Additionally, the security establishment was sensitive to change within the group: when Gama'a changed its tactics from violence to ones of peace, the Egyptian authorities responded with a softer approach, in facilitating meetings between the group's leadership and those members imprisoned for their offences.

In the case of "the Jihad," much of the membership's decision to disengage stemmed from the impetus provided by Gama'a's earlier decision to do so. In addition, the decision of Dr. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, often credited as one of the most important influences on jihadist ideology, to leave terrorism behind had a significant impact on the movement, especially as he made public his disagreement with Ayman al-Zawahiri, believed to be Osama bin Laden's deputy in Al-Qaida. More than any other factor however, the successful and somewhat unprecedented disengagement of the Jihad's sister-group, Gama'a al-Islamiyah, provided the openings (both systemic and cognitive) to abandon violence. Indeed, one group's decision to end its use of violence can have a profound impact on other groups; and in this way disengagement and deradicalization efforts may have a positive cumulative impact on broader counterterrorism initiatives, providing further cause for states and NGOs to pursue disengagement programs.

Southeast Asia

Disengagement or deradicalization initiatives in Southeast Asia, like those in Saudi Arabia, have been inspired and informed to a large extent by the Yemeni "*Committee for Dialogue*" model. The initiatives in Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia illustrate the distinction between cognitive and behavioral components of deradicalization: they facilitate the renunciation of violent means without requiring members to abandon the ideal of a Sharia-governed state.¹⁷ Most of the programs described by Zachary Abuza targeted members of Jemaah Islamiyya, a violent Salafist group which

has claimed responsibility for four major terror attacks since 2002. Though its influence is widespread, Jemaah Islamiyya is difficult for intelligence services to penetrate as its membership is largely comprised of about 150 interconnected families, and the leadership has been careful to use familial and marital ties to ensure the trustworthiness of its members.¹⁸ Such personal ties strengthen the coherence and resilience of terrorist organizations, which several experts posit are fundamentally social constructions.

That is, the radicalization process, though it may be spurred by political grievances, is fueled by the influence of radical group members on acquaintances who may then be brought into the group.¹⁹ Yet, JI's membership is also heterogeneous, including members of varied backgrounds and convictions—such as those who fought in Afghanistan, seculars, and highly educated members—a factor to which Abuza has also ascribed its resilience.²⁰ Consequently, given that there is no single profile of a JI member, disengagement initiatives have also proved particularly challenging.

In each example, respected clerics and former combatants have proven vital to the deradicalization effort through the attempt to reverse violent extremist teachings. The objective has been to convince an individual that his or her actions were not in consonance with religious teachings, and that their earlier understanding of the religion was flawed. On occasion, even before police interrogate detained JI extremists, they send in former JI members to begin initial negotiations and discussions aimed at persuading detainees of the error of their ways, a practice that has become increasingly utilized by such programs. However, the role of ex-members in deradicalization programs has not been without controversy. JI is not an illegal organization in Indonesia, and consequently its program focuses on rehabilitation, and the lack of a parole component in the legal system often leads to

17 For example, Ali Imron, an ex-JI member, teaches that the timing of and lack of support for JI's actions compromised the movement and its objectives, and therefore opposes such acts of violence unless they have more widespread support and can actually assist in achieving their stated goals. Though this may not be palatable to Western audiences, it has been effective in convincing some JI members that such action is of greater cost than benefit to the Muslim community. See Crisis Group, "Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's Current Status," Asia Briefing No.63, Jakarta, May 3, 2007, pp.12-13.

18 Gannon, "Yemen Employs New Terror Approach."

19 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp.66-69. See also, Sageman's *Understanding Terror Networks*, p.128.

20 Indeed, a recent Crisis Group update report credited Jemaah Islamiyya's strength in part to its recruitment campaigns at secular universities. See Crisis Group, "Indonesia." See also Dipak K. Gupta, "Accounting for the Waves of International Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 11 (2008), available at www.terrorismanalysts.com.

amnesty as a reward for cooperation and good behavior. The reward of amnesty in return for cooperation may contradict the importance of justice for the victims, and the relatively comfortable lifestyles of some ex-group members, such as Ali Imron in Indonesia, has stimulated resentment by the public and victims' groups.²¹

In Singapore meanwhile, seventy-three individuals have been detained since the 2002 establishment of a government-run rehabilitation program.²² The project entails sessions with psychologists, counseling sessions for participants and their families, and religious rehabilitation, which is a huge component of the program. The government has invested a great deal of resources in its disengagement program and appears to be reaping the benefits as a result. In neighboring Malaysia, fifty-seven people were detained under its state-run deradicalization program by December 2007. Unlike those programs in Norway and Colombia, disengagement here is seldom voluntary, but facilitated by sometimes controversial security legislation that allows for the protracted incarceration of terrorist suspects.

Groups like JI have learned from the examples of organizations in the Middle East, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and have sought to maximize support through the distribution of aid and financial assistance to members' families, especially following national disasters. In response to the successful role played by such outreach mechanisms, governments—for example, that of Malaysia—have sought to counter the risks of recidivism by offering financial and economic assistance or compensation to the families of incarcerated JI members. This component mirrors similar efforts in Colombia and Bangladesh, for example, where authorities have recognized the socioeconomic drivers that fuel recruitment to violent groups, and sought to mitigate the effects of incarceration on future generations of a detainee's family.

It is also worth noting that although many countries may not have official deradicalization

programs, they are taking steps that incorporate many of the lessons learned from such processes elsewhere. Additionally, a number of donors with longstanding investments in development programs have been considering means of contributing to countering radicalization or violent extremism through their development and capacity-building assistance projects. In these, too, the importance of local context and understanding the needs of prospective beneficiaries in order to undermine the rhetoric of extremist groups, many of whom exploit the plight of the needy to justify their views, has been increasingly highlighted in assessment reports.²³

COMMON PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Though different types of programs—be they individual or collective, state- or NGO-run—are suited to different cases, it is worth noting that those programs aimed at “rehabilitating” terrorists and other violent extremists share several common elements. Indeed, a number of similarities in program and incentive design, methods and processes, and even participant involvement, exist across many of the programs and are worth noting here.

Motivation

As was pointed out at the conference, an individual's reasons for joining an extremist group in the first place may play a role in their subsequent disengagement. These reasons can be similar across regions, causes, and means, and include economic, social, and psychological drivers. However, Horgan, Bjørgo, and others argued that these often have little to do with a person's beliefs and are instead inextricably linked to social relationships and group dynamics. Indeed, lack of employment, desire to meet new people, family troubles, and even the desire to “play” with guns and explosives have variously been cited as incentives to join sub-state violent groups. Similarly, reasons for disengaging from terrorism and violent extremism can be common even across geographically disparate groups and can include economic and social motivators. As seen above, these may be

21 Crisis Group, “Deradicalisation and Indonesian Prisons,” Asia Briefing No.142, Jakarta, November 19, 2007, p.13.

22 Detailed information on the Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore may be found at its website, www.rrg.sg.

23 See, for example, Karin von Hippel, “A Counterradicalization Strategy for a New U.S. Administration,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008): 182-196; see also, Julian Brett and Finn Skadkaer Pedersen, “Study to Identify Good Practices of Development Assistance in Support of Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building in Developing Countries: Country Studies from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mali and Tanzania,” report commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark, June 2008.

seized upon by program facilitators to progress toward disengagement and/or deradicalization. Among common factors encouraging disengagement are familial influences, frustration at lack of progress achieved through violence, trauma after attacks, disillusionment with leadership, and so forth.

Family Involvement in Disengagement and Deradicalization Processes

Most of the programs cited here involve an element of familial engagement. As Bjorgo noted, this was a critical factor in the success of the *Exit* programs. Researchers noted that partners, spouses, and family obligations can sometimes be the driving force behind disengagement from violent activism. Although it cannot be presumed that spouses are always a moderating influence—one conference participant noted that sometimes wives or mothers are integral elements of the radicalization process—girlfriends and wives were cited by some group members as primary reasons for pursuing disengagement or deradicalization.²⁴ Conversely, as is the case with JI in Southeast Asia, the family can also strengthen the coherence of radical groups. However, programs such as the Saudi initiatives, as well as those undertaken by many other states and organizations, can draw on such influence to turn family members away from violence if it is perceived that violent extremism will do long-term damage to the social fabric.

Financial Incentives and Support

Family involvement was seen in a number of cases to be important in another respect. By supporting members' families either through stipends, education assistance, or employment, several government-initiated programs were able to help ensure participants had an income source other than that from their illicit connections. Similarly, the current US program in Iraq, elaborated on below, pays participants to work on "ordinary" occupations, thus providing a disincentive to engage in extremist violence.²⁵ Something as simple as paying members and their families proved highly effective in facilitating social reintegration and preventing recidivism into old patterns of behavior. Furthermore, financial assistance helped remove



Panelists Edward C. Luck and John Horgan.

the ties of dependency between violent groups, group members, and their families and provide alternative skills and occupations, thereby also sharing the responsibility for an individual's actions with the family whose future wellbeing will be dependent on their progress.

Risks of Recidivism Associated with Location and Social Network

Several participants noted that the further removed an individual member was from the group, the more likely success would be for a disengagement or deradicalization program. This was repeatedly raised in the cases of various different groups and lends support to the recent RAND study that found that those in prison who mixed with radical detainees were more likely to become radicalized themselves.²⁶ In cases where entire families or neighborhoods are radicalized, this poses a particular challenge and may conflict with the objective of reintegrating disengaged activists into their "home" society. Where the influence of the family may be moderating or beneficial, such challenges may be overcome by relocating entire families to locations best suited to the deradicalization of a detainee, and has been practiced in several programs. However, the associated expense makes such a move prohibitive for many developing countries seeking to pursue "soft" counterterrorism programs, already suffering from a scarcity of resources and capacity.

24 See John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2008).

25 Judith Miller, "Anti-Jihad U.," *City Journal*, May 2, 2008, available at www.city-journal.org/2008/eon0502jm.html.

26 Hannah, Clutterbuck, and Rubin, "Radicalization or Rehabilitation."

Success Levels

Evidence from DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) projects suggests that deradicalization and social reintegration works best in the case of those individuals who are undecided about disengagement, rather than with those who are strongly opposed to such a course of action. Indeed, those determined to leave a group will find a way to do so, but, as Ribetti noted, programs and assistance measures, such as those in Colombia (and elsewhere) can make successful disengagement and reincorporation far more likely and sustainable. However, even those programs effective in achieving their stated goals in many cases experienced varying rates of failure. Abuza explained that, in any given program, one cannot expect a 100 percent success rate, “If you’re batting 500, you’re going to be in the Hall of Fame as far as rehab is concerned.”

With the huge number of detainees held on terrorism-related charges worldwide, such innovative programs as those above offer creative and sensitive solutions to governments grappling with the impending release of potentially dangerous individuals, who are inherently vulnerable to extremism. Iraq’s US-led program last year sought to deal with 24,000 detainees, while the Saudi program was designed partly with recently-released Guantanamo Bay inmates in mind.²⁷ While the numbers may not be as high in all cases, participants noted that the potential cost of inaction in many cases exceeded the high cost of program implementation and the long-term damage of violent extremism on development initiatives and the complex social fabric, especially in multiethnic societies.

Challenges to Implementation

In spite of the impressive results of many of the programs discussed above, and the role they have played in preventing and countering violent

extremism and terrorism, there are a number of challenges that prevent their widespread adoption. Many of these are significant, though not necessarily insurmountable.

Lack of Research

Disengagement and deradicalization is a relatively new component of counterterrorism studies. Although an increasing amount of attention, by academics and others, has been directed to the process of radicalization and ways of preventing it, this has until very recently failed to translate into increased attention on the reverse mechanisms. This is unsurprising, as Cronin noted that the study of terrorism is itself in an incipient stage, with the majority of articles written in the 1990s being one-offs written by first-time authors on terrorism.²⁸

With all the emphasis on radicalization, few have recognized the commonalities between the processes of deradicalization and disengagement across geographical boundaries or its impact on reducing the size of violent groups. Additionally, concerns about personal safety and access to classified or sensitive information prevent researchers from developing an accessible data set on which to base studies. However, there are signs that this may be changing slowly, given the expressed interest in the forthcoming volume by Bjørgo and Horgan, and in recommendations to pursue such programs exemplified by the RAND study on deradicalization in prisons and the 2007 Report of the Future of Terrorism Task Force.²⁹ The latter recommends that knowledge regarding radicalization could be used to develop a set of metrics that might comprise an early warning system of radicalization and consequently, such a system could be used to target deradicalization programs.³⁰

Designing Programs

Designing a balanced program that takes into account concerns regarding security and human rights has proved challenging in many cases. Additionally, a number of states face more than one type of violent extremist group, ranging in ideology

27 Joshua Kurlantzick, “Fighting Terrorism with Terrorists,” *The Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2008.

28 Audrey Kurth Cronin at “Leaving Terrorism Behind,” conference, referencing Andrew Silke: “a massive proportion (83 per cent) of the articles published in the 1990s were from one-timers (that is, authors who wrote only one article in the mainstream journals during the entire period).” See Andrew Silke, “The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research,” in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, edited by Andrew Silke (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p.191.

29 Hannah, Clutterbuck, and Rubin, “Radicalization or Rehabilitation.”

30 US Department of Homeland Security, *Report of the Future of Terrorism Task Force*, January 2007, available at www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hsac-future-terrorism-010107.pdf.

from racist to religious, nationalist, or separatist, and acting as violent gangs, terrorists, or insurgents. Consequently, the same mechanisms and techniques cannot be applied across the board. An additional obstacle in designing such programs lies in having the requisite know-how or capacity to do so, as well as the financial and human resources needed to implement often costly programs. It was also noted that regime type impacted the willingness of governments to entertain a “softer” approach that emphasized counseling and rehabilitation, as in the Saudi program or the *Sakhina* initiatives, rather than one based more on a militarized or securitized approach.

The programs discussed at the conference all focused on facilitating disengagement or deradicalization once an individual or group has decided that is the path to be pursued. However, these programs cannot in themselves bring about the decision to cease violent extremist activity. Although causes such as disillusionment, exhaustion, or fear were cited as prompting people to seek a “normal” life, few programs addressed the challenge of *causing* the decision to disengage and instead addressed the following steps of facilitating the process and reentry into “civilian” life. However the importance of the individual’s commitment to withdraw from violent extremism was a key element in the initiatives described by all the researchers and in many cases the motivations for joining violent groups provided some insight into the inducements and incentives which might be used to persuade members to disengage from such activity.

Measuring Success

As noted earlier, almost all programs experienced some degree of failure. This is compounded by the fact that the metrics of success for a given disengagement or deradicalization program are difficult to define; success itself is often marred by a lack of agreement on desired outcomes or benchmarks against which impact may be measured. The nature of the terrorist threat means that 100 percent successful prevention is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Furthermore, successful prevention is difficult to convey to the

public when trying to communicate the importance of deradicalization initiatives—a thwarted terrorist attack will never quite garner the same number of column inches as a suicide bombing.

Does disengagement require deradicalization in order to be successful? Analysts and experts have been divided on this question, and how it impacts evaluations of success for deradicalization or disengagement programs. Horgan notes the difference between physical and psychological disengagement; the former suggests that while a person may withdraw from membership in a violent group, they might retain their views or else simply assume a supportive role in the organization rather than executing violent acts—a process known as “role migration.”³¹ However, others believe strongly that for such initiatives to be truly successful, disengagement would have to be accompanied by deradicalization or psychological disengagement. One case cited by a researcher was that of the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in Pakistan, where it was argued that such disengagement initiatives would be futile if participants then had to return to communities fostering radical extremist beliefs. Similarly, the example of the AUC in Colombia was cited, where a decision for collective demobilization taken by the leadership did not necessarily reflect the psychological disengagement of individual members.³² As Abuza notes, “At the end of this program, you are probably still going to have someone committed to the establishment of Sharia, who is probably still going to be less than friendly toward non-Muslims and ethnic minorities.”³³

Resources

As noted above, disengagement and deradicalization programs require extensive financial resources and expertise, highlighted in particular by the success of well-funded programs in Singapore and Saudi Arabia. Limited capacity and funds—or even political will to continue investment in such programs—remain obstacles for program development and implementation in many smaller countries. Indeed, even some programs organized and financed by NGOs in wealthy, developed countries have had to scale back or shut down due

31 Also noted in *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no.4 (February 2008), available at www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/articles/issues/PTv2i4.pdf.

32 Ibid.

33 Kurlantzick, “Fighting Terrorism with Terrorists.”

to budgetary concerns.

Exemplifying the scale of resources required for a relatively comprehensive deradicalization program is the recently launched initiative by the United States to deradicalize and rehabilitate detainees at Camp Cropper and Camp Bucca in Iraq, referred to as the “Anti-Jihad University.” This program is geared towards training suspected insurgents in different occupational skills (e.g., farming, carpentry, art) while simultaneously fostering religious discussion and paying participants for their work. Consequently, participants have an alternative source of income and social support to the extremist groups to which they might otherwise have turned. Additionally, the program encourages the involvement of families through visits and facilitates educational opportunities. The hefty price tag of this program is \$1 billion for one year.³⁴ However, given the importance of “hearts and minds” to the counterterrorism effort, states may feel that these costs are far outweighed by the costs of inaction or neglect, and vital to countering the adverse effects of negative publicity, for example following incidents of detainee maltreatment at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Monitoring

The difficulty of monitoring participants following the conclusion of a program impacts the ability to measure success, and is not unrelated to challenges concerning resources and capacity. That is, not all programs have the capacity to track the behavior and movements of participants after they leave the program; this expense is particularly felt in NGO-led programs since their government-run counterparts have access to the security and intelligence mechanisms of the state. While this access is helpful on a number of levels, it also raises concerns regarding civil liberties. Monitoring is important, especially given the dangers of recidivism, requiring sophisticated and complex programs or parole-like mechanisms for postrelease support and assistance.

The monitoring process is also key to distinguishing between sincere and insincere repentants. Programs such as the German initiative under the *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution*,

undertook complex screening procedures at the outset. However, some programs, such as that in Yemen, did not undertake this and consequently suffered high rates of recidivism which for some time compromised the program and its intellectual underpinnings.

Transparency

Programs such as those in a number of Southeast Asian countries or those based on a primarily security-driven approach, are often subject to calls for greater transparency in their operations. However, as with many other issues in the practice of counterterrorism, this poses a challenge in balancing the need to maintain secure and classified files pertaining to national security with the need to uphold human rights and civil liberties. Nevertheless, it was noted that alongside political willingness to invest in such programs, public receptivity to those rehabilitated or deradicalized was essential in facilitating their reintegration into social networks. Consequently, a certain degree of transparency was deemed necessary in order to engage the public and obtain their buy-in for such programs.

Of course, on the flipside, more transparent programs are more vulnerable to abuse by insincere participants, who seek to either claim its benefits on false grounds or perhaps sabotage it from the inside. As one graduate of the Yemeni initiative observed recently, “We understood what the judge (al-Hittar) wanted and he understood what we wanted from him. The Yemeni Mujahedeen in prison know Hittar is a way for them to get released so they ingratiate themselves with him. There was no long or complex dialogue.”³⁵

National—Transnational Disconnect

There are many forms of violent extremist groups. Some are primarily local or national actors, such as many racist groups or separatists/insurgents, focusing on particularly national political or social issues. Others, like Al-Qaida, are transnational in reach especially as their ideas and objectives are exported to self-started or “leaderless” groups. Additionally, symbolic sites may attract the attention of groups whose agenda focuses on a

³⁴ Miller, “Anti-Jihad U.”

³⁵ Hannah, Clutterbuck, and Rubin, “Radicalization or Rehabilitation,” p.37.

government elsewhere—the events of September 11, 2001, were targeted as much at the Saudi regime as they were towards the US. However, most deradicalization or disengagement programs focus on national or local actors, and are often designed in collaboration with the state for the benefit of its citizens. They do not address the challenge of foreign actors or the transnational nature of many radical groups. As in areas such as countering the financing of terrorism or blocking travel of suspected terrorists, the nature of the threat warrants targeting the transnational scope of some groups, and indicates the need for international cooperation.

Political Will, Security vs. Justice

In many instances, political will was integral to progress and to deciding how to achieve it. This was especially apparent in the programs discussed in New York, where several Scandinavian governments, along with those of Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, to name a few, were integral to the development and implementation of the programs. It is a prerequisite for resource allocation, which is especially vital to implementing nascent programs in developing countries.

How the proper balance between security and justice is calculated in each society also has an important impact on the social and political “space” needed to engage in such programs. Some societies recognize the lack of resources and have devised innovative mechanisms for truth and reconciliation between repentant perpetrators and victims. Ribetti described how acts of reconciliation varied, from monuments created from melted weapons, to confessional sessions between perpetrators and victims—and individuals often traveled very far to engage in these sessions even though the state could afford to offer no monetary compensation. However, it was also noted that some places are less likely to succeed in instituting such programs, for example, see the failed attempts at social reconciliation in Northern Ireland in the wake of the Troubles.

Another facet of this issue is the challenge of offering amnesty for repentance or rehabilitation without compromising on the punitive measures required by law. Will society or victims tolerate what may seem like impunity awarded to perpetrators of violent crimes in the pursuit of disengagement? One participant pointed out that amnesties

could be provided following sentencing, thereby permitting the law to take its course and provide victims some comfort in acknowledging the crime committed, but then offering amnesty following the fulfillment of all or part of the sentence, on the model of parole.

For such programs to be effective, well-resourced, and legitimate in public eyes, political support is a critical element. They will require the allocation of political will and state resources and capacities, even if partnered with an NGO. States will be vital in making decisions on how to balance security and justice. However, for disengagement and deradicalization programs to be successful and acquire sufficient means for implementation, it is vital that states recognize the value of such programs as part of a broad and comprehensive counterterrorism effort.

What Role for the UN?

Although terrorism itself is not a new subject of deliberation at the United Nations, the burst of activity following September 11, 2001, and the passage of Security Council Resolution 1373 have brought the subject to the forefront of many states’ agendas. Although this has not been without controversy, as some states feared the securitization of their interests, the General Assembly, with its universal state membership, adopted in September 2006 the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. By condemning terrorism “in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, as it constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security,” all Member States took a bold step in delegitimizing the use of violence for any purpose or political expression. The Strategy assumes a multilayered approach to counterterrorism, acknowledging the role of short-, medium-, and long-term measures, and addresses terrorism from a holistic perspective. Four key action areas are highlighted in the Strategy:

- (1) addressing conditions conducive to terrorism;
- (2) preventing and combating terrorism;
- (3) building and developing state capacity to counter terrorism, and developing the UN’s role in this regard; and
- (4) ensuring respect for human rights in counterterrorism activities.

Under the CTITF, a number of Working Groups have been created to address concerns raised by Member States. Among these is the Working Group on “Addressing Radicalization and Extremism that lead to Terrorism” mentioned earlier, co-led by the UN Monitoring team of the 1267 Committee, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and UNICRI. This Working Group aims to help states take practical action toward addressing factors that promote extremism and recruitment to terrorism. It aims to identify how states assess the problem of radicalization, what they have done to address it, and what further action they can take. By collecting the views and experiences of Member States, the Working Group hopes to be able to offer all states a comprehensive summary of possible policy options to prevent acts of terrorism and to enhance national and regional capacity to deradicalize those who support terrorist groups.

Given the universal membership of the UN, its access to international expertise, and its convening power, participants at the conference suggested key roles in which the United Nations could contribute to facilitating disengagement and deradicalization through its counterterrorism initiatives:

1. COLLATING BEST PRACTICES AND INFORMATION SHARING

The Working Group on “Addressing Radicalization and Extremism that lead to Terrorism” is collating information about existing disengagement and deradicalization and mapping existing initiatives.³⁶ In this way, the UN can serve as a repository of information and best practices which can be accessible to Member States and their counterterrorism practitioners. Additionally, by drawing on its convening capacity, the United Nations and its partners can facilitate the dissemination of such information through cooperative and consultative workshops.

2. FACILITATING COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The UN can also empower and facilitate regional and cross-regional cooperative mechanisms among counterterrorism practitioners. Participants agreed that one of the benefits of this conference was the

ability to learn from different national and nongovernmental initiatives, and engage in discussions with academics, practitioners, and the UN community.

The replication of such exchanges at regional, subregional, and cross-regional levels will facilitate better understanding of the radicalization processes and indicators, and also provide the necessary information and lessons learned for states developing and further refining their programs.

One product from such a series of exchanges might be a compendium or manual derived from states’ collated best practices and experiences in setting up a disengagement or deradicalization program. Such a manual could be made available on request to member states in the process of developing or strengthening their own programs, and offer opportunities to learn from other states with similar—and different—experiences. A word of caution is however warranted. While such exchanges are important and can be extremely fruitful, it should be born in mind that many aspects of each scheme are context-specific and require adaptation before being adopted across heterogeneous environments.

3. DEVELOPING STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS

The mapping exercise currently being undertaken by the CTITF’s Working Group may be developed into a series of standards and benchmarks that states and their programs might use to measure success.

Several practitioners and conference participants noted that this would be of great assistance in judging the programs and their achievements. Furthermore, it would facilitate adjustments and refinements based on a comparison with other similar programs, or those targeting similar individuals or groups. Although the conference covered programs as far apart as Norway and Indonesia, Bjørgo and Horgan noted that in spite of the differences in rhetoric and method, many violent extremist groups share similar psychological processes and therefore warrant comparative approaches.

³⁶ The Working Group’s report on UN Member States’ policies and initiatives designed to address radicalization and violent extremism that lead to terrorism is available on the CTITF website, www.un.org/terrorism/pdfs/Report%20of%20the%20Working%20Group%20-%20Workgroup%202.pdf.

4. CAPACITY-BUILDING ASSISTANCE FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Arms of the United Nations, such as UNICRI and UNODC, perform roles that supplement the UN's counterterrorism efforts by facilitating cooperative relationships among practitioners and transmitting technical knowledge and assistance. Currently, UNICRI is an active partner of the CTITF and its Security Governance/Counter-Terrorism Lab houses the Working Group on "Addressing Radicalization and Extremism that lead to Terrorism," described above. UNODC, by working on developing and strengthening criminal justice systems, may also serve as a key channel through which to pursue the prison and law enforcement reforms most conducive to deradicalization and disengagement.³⁷

5. NORM-SETTING AND MEDIA OUTREACH

In many subject areas, such as human rights, decolonization, and child combatants, the UN has served as a setter of international norms. Through its media and outreach campaigns, the UN and its agencies have raised awareness of conflict zones, and used Goodwill Ambassadors to highlight the plight of the needy, delegitimize weapons like landmines, and draw attention to violence against noncombatants. This role could be further extended to set international standards and norms delegitimizing the use of violence against innocent bystanders and to highlight the impact of violent extremism on families and societies, bolstered by a strong and vocal commitment from cross-regional coalition of UN Member States.

One participant at the conference recounted that, following a US attack which resulted in the destruction of a school in Pakistan, inhabitants of the town gathered earth from the site in their hands and called it "holy ground" while asserting their anger at the Americans. Similarly, public anger at the violence perpetrated against innocent victims by violent radical and terrorist groups might be harnessed to delegitimize the groups and discourage operational support and recruitment. By highlighting the human cost of terrorism and

the plight of victims of violent campaigns designed in particular to target innocent civilians, the UN might launch a campaign to delegitimize the use of violence for political means and generate similar responses to acts of terrorism that target innocent people.³⁸ Such mechanisms have already begun to work against groups like Al-Qaida, whose brutality even against their coreligionists has prompted disdain and recriminations from senior Islamic scholars and even exponents of jihad.³⁹

Horgan and Abuza also recalled that it was when faced with the effect of the Bali attacks on innocent women and children that Nasir Abbas felt revulsion at the acts. As clandestine extremist groups often rely on their communities for some form of support, such a campaign might assist in delegitimizing their actions and cutting them off from much needed supplies, while forcing group members to face the consequences of their actions and consider disengaging from the violent extremism.

Conference participants also noted that the work of the United Nations in promoting development, education, human rights, and good governance may itself be seen as facilitating disengagement and deradicalization by countering the rhetoric of extremism and promoting mechanisms for social, economic, and personal development.

Conclusion

As Member States and UN counterterrorism bodies prepared for the review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in September 2008, the "Leaving Terrorism Behind" conference provided a timely opportunity to bring together academics, practitioners, and the UN community to discuss the role of multilateralism in facilitating disengagement and deradicalization activities.

The case studies presented highlighted numerous common elements within the process of deradicalization or disengagement found in individuals and groups seeking to withdraw from violent extremism, whether racist groups in northern Europe or militant jihadists in Southeast Asia. Presentations noted the role played by disillusion-

37 Crisis Group, "Deradicalisation and Indonesian Prisons"; Hannah, Clutterbuck, and Rubin, "Radicalization or Rehabilitation."

38 The symposium held by the UN Secretary-General on September 9, 2008, on the victims of terrorism provided a valuable forum to begin such a campaign.

39 Bernard Haykel, "Islamic Debates over the War in Iraq and Attacks on the West," *The World Today* 61, no.10, October 2005.



Conference in session.

ment, revulsion at violent acts, or ineptitude or hypocrisy of group leaders, in spurring the desire to disengage. Additionally, the importance of social networks, financial and psychological assistance, and the willingness of the receiving community to accept former perpetrators of violence, were all notable among the various groups discussed.

However, the conference discussions also shed light on the importance of context and local knowledge for understanding both the drivers of radicalization and the most effective means to counter them. Furthermore, the design and efficacy of the programs discussed were dependent on cultural and religious norms. Consequently, civil society groups were at a particular advantage in initiating programs or partnering with the state. Given their local knowledge and ability to act as a bridge between communities, former perpetrators of violence, and the state or civil society groups may be able to assist with a number of key functions indicated for successful disengagement or deradicalization. For example, they may help with raising awareness and developing advocacy campaigns highlighting the effects of violence on the community and innocents, facilitating employment training for ex-group members, or providing social

and medical services targeting the needs of individuals seeking to leave violent groups. Civil society groups can also provide a grassroots approach to help state-level actors overcome political obstacles.

Drawing on the discussions, Professor Edward Luck noted that although the UN might not be a central actor in many of these programs, which are mostly the result of national initiatives, it could provide the mechanisms for transmitting lessons learned from one country to another. Furthermore, the UN might draw on its comparative advantage as a convening forum and serve as a coordinator for Member States and donors whose interests lie in furthering such programs. To that end it was also noted that the Working Group was receptive to the needs and interests expressed by Member States, and welcomed their input on its work.

Disengagement and deradicalization, as components of a holistic long-term counterterrorism strategy remain relatively understudied. The volume “Leaving Terrorism Behind” and the conference in April 2008 of the same name indicate a beginning rather than an end of the discussion. The call for further research on this subject was made by Bjørge, Horgan, and many of the presenters, who noted that we still need to better

understand how to cause the desire to withdraw from violent extremism and how to better understand the measures of success for these programs. It will also be important to understand how these developments relate to their context. Are people deradicalizing or disengaging because of a changing environment or because of successful programs? Further research and a better understanding of the processes and drivers of

individual and collective disengagements will assist states in better understanding how these processes relate to their counterterrorism strategies and capacities, and the UN, with its role in facilitating knowledge exchange and providing technical assistance may be a vital element in a truly holistic and transnational approach to the challenge of violent extremism.

Selected Readings

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Annex: Conference Agenda

“Leaving Terrorism Behind:
Individual and Collective Disengagement from Violent Extremism”

April 22, 2008

InterContinental Hotel, New York, NY

Jointly hosted by
International Peace Institute
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

08:30 **Breakfast**

09:00 **Welcome Remarks**

Edward Luck, *Senior Vice President and Director of Studies,
International Peace Institute*

Terje M. Pedersen, *Deputy Minister of Justice and the Police, Norway*

Robert Orr, *Chairman, UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force*

09:30 **Introducing “Leaving Terrorism Behind”**

Tore Bjørge, *Professor, Norwegian Police University College; Senior Research Fellow,
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Volume Editor, Leaving Terrorism Behind*

John Horgan, *Director, International Centre for the Study of Terrorism,
Penn State University; Volume Editor, Leaving Terrorism Behind*

Moderator

Edward Luck

- What does disengagement from terrorism mean?
- What is the relationship between radicalization and prevention, deradicalization and disengagement?
- Why is it important to promote individual or collective disengagement as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy?

10:15 **Conditions Conducive to Disengagement**

John Horgan

“The disengagement process for the individual.”

Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Professor of Strategy, US National War College*

“How terrorist campaigns end.”

Moderator

Richard Barrett, *Coordinator, Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999) concerning Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities*

- How are the motivations for joining a terrorist group related to the possibilities of disengagement?
- How are the social and psychological processes involved in disengagement similar and/or different to those engaged in joining a terrorist group?
- How does the social and political context shape the range of policy options for facilitating “exits” from terrorist groups? Are there marked differences between regions or types of terrorism?
- How do those joining a religious cause differ from those joining a political cause, and how might that impact the design of “exit” programs?

11:15 Coffee Break

12:00 **Disengagement Programs: Part I**

Marcella Ribetti, *Senior Research Analyst, CENTRA Technology*
“Demobilization of Colombian guerrillas.”

Zachary Abuza, *Professor of Political Science, Simmons College*
“Disengagement and deradicalization in Southeast Asia.”

Moderator

Abdullah M. Al-Saidi, *Permanent Representative of Yemen to the United Nations*

- How have states facilitated disengagement? Lessons learned?
- What are the unique ways in which disengagement and deradicalization are conceptualized in different countries?
- What are the roles of social networks and kinship ties in the engagement with, and disengagement from, terrorist activities?
- How can you identify and address the challenge of “insincere” repentants?
- How can one minimize recidivism and ensure more long-term disengagement, so that the results are sustainable?
- What are the social, political, and ethical dilemmas in releasing former terrorists back into society?
- What resources can a state devote to the programs in order to sustain the support to disengagement/deradicalization program participants after release and include a more holistic approach to support them (alternate income, education for children, rent, transportation, continuing study)?

13:30 Lunch Break

14:30 **Disengagement Programs: Part II**

Chris Boucek, *Postdoctoral Research Associate, Princeton University*
“Disengagement initiatives in Saudi Arabia.”

Diaa Rashwan, *Analyst, Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies*
“Disengagement from terrorism in Egypt.”

Tore Bjørgo
“Exit programs in Northern Europe.”

Moderator

Neven Jurica, *Permanent Representative of Croatia to the UN; Chairman, Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1373 (2001) concerning counterterrorism*

16:00

Coffee Break

16:15

Lessons Learned for the International Community

Richard Barrett and Laila Bokhari, *Research Fellow, TERRA*
 “The UN’s work on countering radicalization.”

Hamidon Ali, *Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the UN*
 “Perspectives on countering radicalization.”

Moderator

Eric Rosand, *Senior Fellow, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation*

- What lessons learned might support the UN in its implementation of the GA Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and how can multilateral organizations complement national disengagement initiatives?
- How could NGOs and other organizations facilitate disengagement?
- What is the optimal role for governments and civil society in these programs?
- What are the challenges faced by member states in undertaking such initiatives and what role can the UN play in supporting these endeavors?
- What initiatives might the UN and its partners/agencies incorporate into their counterterrorism strategies, and how might its agencies support national initiatives?

17:45

Wrap-up and Concluding Remarks

Hamed El-Said, *Security Governance/Counter-Terrorism Laboratory,*
 “*Addressing Radicalization and Extremism that Lead to Terrorism,*” UNICRI

Mona Juul, *Deputy Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN*

Moderator

Edward Luck

18:15

Close of Session

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