



# **COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM:**

Developing an evidence-base for policy and practice

**EDITED BY SARA ZEIGER & ANNE ALY**

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# **Countering Violent Extremism:**

Developing an Evidence-base for  
Policy and Practice

*edited by*

Sara Zeiger & Anne Aly

The views expressed in the chapters of this publication are the opinions of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Hedayah, Curtin University or People against Violent Extremism (PaVE).

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## **ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS**

**Hedayah** is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, an international, independent think-and-do tank based in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. A product of the GCTF, Hedayah's mission is to be the global hub of experts and expertise and platform for good practice sharing for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy, programs and practice.

**The Countering Online Violent Extremism Research Program (COVER)** located with the Centre for Culture and Technology at Curtin University comprises a range of research projects and activities that explore various facets of the relationship between violent extremism and the internet. The COVER program conducts and collects innovative research on online violent extremism and is a platform for disseminating research and ensuring it informs policy and practice.

**People against Violent Extremism (PaVE)** is Australia's only non-government organisation dedicated to countering violent extremism in Australia and the region. PaVE currently runs a number of youth centred programs designed to develop the capacity of civil society to address issues of violent extremism through innovative practice and peer-to-peer influence.

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## **Introduction: The need for research in countering violent extremism policy and practice**

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**KEYWORDS:** *research, countering violent extremism, prevention, counter-terrorism*

This volume reports on the range of papers presented at the Annual Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Conference 2014 from 7-8 December 2014 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Conference was organized and hosted by Hedayah (the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism), Curtin University, People Against Violent Extremism (PaVE), and the Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Conference was also sponsored in part by the European Commission and the United States Department of State. The event was attended by approximately 100 academics, practitioners and policymakers from over 25 countries. The 2014 CVE Research Conference follows from the inaugural CVE Symposium hosted by Curtin University, PaVE, Macquarie University and Hedayah in Perth, Australia in 2013. As the first of its kind in the region, the 2013 Symposium brought together national and international scholars, practitioners, policymakers and former extremists to discuss and debate the current state and future directions for CVE. The intention for the CVE Research Conference is to be an annual event at which the yearly highlights of cutting-edge CVE research and innovation can be presented to academics, researchers, practitioners and policymakers on a global scale.

### **The Need for CVE Research**

In an age where the threat of terrorism from non-state actors is on the rise and traditional counter-terrorism policies do not seem to be reducing terrorism worldwide (Crelinsten, 2009), governments are looking towards strategies, policies and programs to interrupt radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism. These interventions are known as preventing or countering violent extremism (P/CVE) or countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) by a number of international stakeholders and governments. For the purposes of the Conference and this edited volume, the concept of CVE refers to the programs and policies for

countering and preventing radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism as part of an overall counter-terrorism strategy and framework. This definition is inclusive of strategic, non-coercive counterterrorism programs and policies including those involving education and broad-based community engagement; more targeted narrative/messaging programs and counter-recruitment strategies; disengagement and targeted intervention programs for individuals engaging in radicalization; as well as de-radicalization, disengagement and rehabilitation programs for former violent extremist offenders.

Practitioners and policymakers working on CVE have indicated that a strong evidence-base is necessary in order to improve the development and implementation of effective CVE policies and programs. The subject has received international policy-level attention from multiple countries and international stakeholders. International counter-terrorism policy documents such as the UN Security Council Resolution 2129 (2013) reaffirming the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) mandate invites CTED to “engage and enhance its partnerships with... academia and other entities in conducting research and information-gathering, and identifying good practices” (UNSCR 2129, 2013, p. 7). Several of the main framework documents of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) produced by their CVE Working Group also emphasize the need for research and field studies to identify drivers of violent extremism and emerging threats, and to better inform policy and program decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Follow-On Action Agenda of the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism Ministerial Meeting that took place in February 2015 also cites promoting local research and information-sharing on the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism as one of the main action points for follow-up after the Summit.<sup>2</sup>

The existing literature on CVE also suggests that more research is needed to better drive policy and programming design, specifically research that investigates the processes of radicalization in local contexts. In a literature review on CVE conducted for the Australian government, Nasser-Eddine et. al (2011) emphasized that the majority of the CVE literature consists of commentary and critique, but does not include an empirical research base to the data. While there are many studies that outline processes of radicalization (Horgan, 2014; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; King & Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Horgan, 2006) there are far less studies that present and analyze primary data within a framework based in localized contexts of radicalization and recruitment. Such local

knowledge is crucial for successfully designing interventions that counter these processes.

A further point is to be made regarding access to high quality research in the field of CVE. Despite increased efforts at collaboration between governments and researchers, there is a need for a constructive platform through which researchers doing relevant work on CVE can communicate and share their current findings to the international CVE community (to include practitioners and policymakers alike). Such a platform is useful to share relevant data, good practices, research methods, and lessons learned amongst relevant actors, and to increase the cooperation between those working on the research side of CVE and those writing and implementing policies and programs.

### **Events Supporting CVE Research Conference 2014**

In the lead-up to the CVE Research Conference 2014, two preparatory meetings took place that fed into the Conference. In September 2014, the Australian Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (PICT) at Macquarie University in partnership with Curtin and Massey Universities, hosted a two-day regional Policy Forum in Sydney. The Forum focused on securing tangible outcomes and policy recommendations around five key themes. Each theme was addressed in a closed workshop sponsored by various government and non-government stakeholders:

1. Managing Foreign Fighters: Finding the Best Government and Community Approaches
2. The Social Impacts of Violent Extremism: New Solutions for Community-Based CVE
3. Finding a New Risk Assessment Model for Police
4. Developing National Strategies for Sustaining Resilient Communities
5. Social Media and CVE – Understanding What we Do and Don’t Know

<sup>1</sup> See specifically the *Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism*, Good Practice 2; the *Abu Dhabi Memorandum on Good Practices for Education and Countering Violent Extremism*, Good Practice 5.

<sup>2</sup> The draft versions of the Follow-On Action Agenda from the White House Summit on CVE were kindly shared with the authors by the US government.



Collectively the five workshops examined the current situation, identified gaps, and highlighted opportunities and recommendations for moving forward.

Also in preparation for the conference, Hedayah organized an expert workshop on “Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism” where researchers in CVE assessed the current research landscape in CVE and identified potential gaps and follow-up projects for the CVE community at large. The expert workshop focused on three main topics: disengagement and deradicalization, education and CVE, and narratives and counter-narratives. The discussions also revealed the latest research in three regional groupings, limited, of course, by the time allocated to the meeting. The outcomes of the meeting were captured in six research briefs, informed the CVE Research Conference 2014 scope and agenda, and were reported at the Conference. Some of the main findings of the expert workshop included:

1. There is a need for more clarity on definitions, concepts and framing related to countering violent extremism research (Zeiger, 2014a).
2. Standards for both data collection and ethics should be established by a central authority for research on CVE (Zeiger, 2014a).
3. More empirical research is needed to test underlying assumptions of how poverty, education, good governance and democratization relate to violent extremism (Zeiger, 2014b).
4. More empirical research should be conducted on the needs of the local community in relation to countering violent extremism programming. For example, community attitudes should be assessed before public awareness campaigns and tools to prevent radicalization are disseminated. Similarly, community attitudes should be assessed before designing a reintegration program for former violent extremist offenders or returning foreign fighters (Zeiger, 2014a; Zeiger, 2014b).
5. More empirical research is needed on how social media affects behavior of individuals in a

general sense before making assumptions on how the process of online radicalization can be thwarted (Zeiger, 2014c).

6. More empirical research is needed on how the community is affected by both the radicalization narrative of violent extremists as well as the narrative and actions of governments (Zeiger, 2014c).

## **CVE Research Conference 2014 Contributions**

The CVE Research Conference 2014 was organized by regional panels in order to help identify some of the main challenges, risks and lessons to be learned and applied based on local knowledge and research. Within this regionally based structure, the panels also covered several themes including radicalization, social media, de-radicalization and recruitment and across different forms of violent extremism. The Conference essays are presented in this volume according to several broad thematic groupings. Part 1 of this volume includes the essays that investigate and elaborate on the push and pull factors that lead to radicalization and recruitment, the so-called “drivers” of radicalization. Part 2 presents the essays and discussions that focus on countering the narrative of violent extremism. Part 3 is devoted to contributions dealing with the disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration of former violent extremists. Finally, Part 4 concludes with two case examples of CVE programming that involve the broader community in the CVE efforts.

### **Part 1: Assessing the Local Push and Pull Factors Leading to Radicalization and Recruitment**

One of the crucial challenges in preventing and countering violent extremism begins with identifying the drivers—the push and pull factors—that cause individuals to join violent extremist groups and participate in violent extremism (Denoeux, 2009; USAID, 2011). “Push factors” refer to the environmental grievances and socioeconomic

differences that drive an individual to violent extremism such as poverty, unemployment, clan marginalization, sectarianism, government oppression, or lack of opportunity. “Pull factors” refer to the psychosocial benefit or attraction of violent extremism that fills an individual’s need such as monetary incentives, sense of protection or safety, protection or safety for their family, sense of belonging, revenge for injustice or a death, personal empowerment or religious rewards. This section elaborates on the local push and pull factors in many different contexts, including Western European and non-Western foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria, Al-Shabaab fighters in the Horn of Africa, the threat of violent extremism in Burkina Faso, terrorism and crime in Central Asia, and right-wing extremist groups in Canada.

In “Western European Foreign Fighters in Syria: An Overview,” Peter Neumann provides a snapshot of the profiles of Western European Foreign Fighters traveling to Syria to join the Syrian/Iraqi conflict, with a particular focus on those joining the so-called “Islamic State” and Jabhat al Nusra. He provides crucial insight into the number of fighters joining the conflict, the draw and reasons for these individuals to join, and a snapshot of the threat of Western European foreign fighters on their home countries. He concludes with several policy recommendations concerned with how to deal with the different types of foreign fighters returning from the conflict: from those that are dangerous, to those that are disturbed and to those that are disillusioned with the conflict.

Hamed El Said’s essay “Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Terrorists or freedom fighters?” looks at the drivers of radicalization in the Arab World, particularly with respect to those joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but also more broadly. The fieldwork undertaken for this project occurred in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Mauritania and Sudan from 2012-2014. The fieldwork consisted of interviews and biographical data of former and

interviews with state officials in those countries that worked directly with former and current violent extremists.

The essay titled “From Policy to Practice: Findings and lessons learned from a research-based pilot countering violent extremism programme in the Horn of Africa” by Martine Zeuthen outlines the preliminary results from the Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) program in the Horn of Africa, with field data primarily from Kenya, Somaliland and Puntland. The study focuses on drivers of radicalization and recruitment for those fighters joining Al-Shabaab. One particular aspect of the study aims to compare the recruitment narrative of the Somali Diaspora population traveling to visit Somalia versus the narrative of the host (Somali) population. A second aspect of the study investigates the capacity of women’s organizations in Puntland and Somaliland to prevent violent extremism. A third aspect evaluates the social and political aspects of the local context to highlight the main drivers of radicalization and recruitment. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for future policy and program development.

Peter Romaniuk investigates the potential drivers of radicalization and recruitment in Burkina Faso, and evaluates the likelihood of violent extremism (VE) to take root in that context in his chapter “Assessing violent extremism: The case of Burkina Faso.” Based on field research in Burkina Faso, Romaniuk highlights the push and pull factors that suggest that Burkina Faso could be vulnerable to violent extremism in a significant way, but also outlines the potential sources of resilience among the local population that can be reinforced in order to better prevent an upsurge of violent extremism in the country.

In her chapter on “Terrorism/Crime Nexus in Central Asia: Implications for countering violent extremism and terrorism,” Mariya Omelicheva argues that the threat of violent extremism in Central Asia is not only tied to religious

fundamentalism, but that assessments of radicalization and recruitment in the region and effective responses should consider the nexus between terrorism and transnational crime. She argues that many of the networks of both violent extremism and organized crime are often overlapping, and that the push and pull factors that lead an individual to these activities are often similar in the context of Central Asia. For example, Omelicheva lists remoteness from central authorities, lack of allegiance to government, and lack of economic opportunities and rule of law as some of the push factors that lead to both the rise of organized crime and terrorism. Omelicheva recommends that in order to better tackle the problem of violent extremism in Central Asia, policies and programs should better account for the complex nature of the nexus between terrorism and organized crime, and stop treating all forms of organized violence as products of religious radicalization.

Concluding the section on push and pull factors James O. Ellis III's essay "Right-Wing Extremism in Canada" outlines the history and appeal of right-wing extremism in the Canadian context. After contextualizing right-wing extremism in a broader discourse on violent extremism and terrorism, Ellis highlights the crucial elements to the development of right-wing extremism in Canada. Ellis also focuses on three particular right-wing groups: the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), the Church of the Creator (COTC) and Skinheads. He wraps up his essay with a few policy recommendations for how to best analyze the threat of right-wing extremism, and their potential for violence.

## **Part 2: Countering the Narrative of Violent Extremists**

With the increased activity of violent jihadi groups like ISIS on social media and its ability to broadcast its message through online and traditional media channels to a wide audience in a number of languages, there is increased international attention and call for action to counter these messages. For example, the United States and the United

Arab Emirates recently announced the launch of a strategic communications center to counter-message against ISIS called the Sawab Center, based in Abu Dhabi ("Launch of the Sawab Center," 2015). However, the communications challenge is not only limited to ISIS: all violent extremists adopt strategic communications strategies as an integral component of their strategic and tactical capabilities. This section discusses the latest research on CVE messaging in different contexts: ISIS, white power extremism in Australia, and violent extremism in Southeast Asia (Indonesia/Malaysia).

In "Challenging the Narrative of the 'Islamic State,'" Alex Schmid discusses twelve claims made by the terrorist group, the self-proclaimed "Islamic State," and possible narratives and alternatives to challenge the narrative. Schmid argues that this challenge should take place in public and open forums using diverse types of media (TV, radio, public speeches and statements, social media, online forums) and with a number of credible messengers.

The essay "Countering Online Violent Extremism in Australia: Research and preliminary findings" by Anne Aly and Kosta Lucas examines the nexus between online content and radicalization towards violent extremism, specifically reporting the preliminary findings from an ongoing research project through the Curtin University Countering Online Violent Extremism Research (CoVER) program. The research framework draws on existing theories within the fields of media, messaging and counter-terrorism, and investigates 1) the ways in which the audience interacts with the messages received, and 2) the medium and conditions in which these messages exist online. Based on preliminary analysis of the findings, the research concluded that the content of the narrative alone is not the only variable that should be accounted for in developing a counter-narrative.

The chapter titled "Countering the Terrorist

Narrative: Issues and challenges in contesting such spaces” by Thomas Samuel outlines the logic of the terrorists’ narrative in a three step process that highlights 1) the injustices occurring in many parts of the world, 2) there is a need to act, and 3) violence is the only possible response. Drawing on his experiences interviewing former terrorists in Southeast Asia, Samuel also offers suggestions for a useful and successful counter-narrative to this process. He argues that the elements of a successful counter-narrative should include analyzing the objectives of the terrorist organization and the performance of the group against those objectives, highlighting the shortcomings and pitfalls.

### **Part 3: Disengagement, Deradicalization and Reintegration of Former Fighters**

Another major concern in the field of CVE is how to disengage, deradicalize and reintegrate ex-offenders and ex-fighters back into the mainstream population, either after returning from the battlefield, or during and after serving their term in prison. This section presents the latest research from five different contexts with regards to disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration programs: the Philippines, Northern Ireland, Colombia, Denmark and Germany.

Clarke Jones examines the process of radicalization and disengagement in the context of the Philippine prison system in “Testing the Notion that Prisons are Schools for Terrorism: Examining radicalization and disengagement in the Philippine Corrective System.” He uses the case studies of two correctional systems, one being the New Bilibid Prison, which integrates the violent extremist offenders into the general prison population, and the other the Metro Manila District Jail, which segregates the violent extremist offenders from the main prison population. In his research, Jones has found that the violent extremist offenders present in the integrated prison have relatively little influence on the mainstream prison population in terms of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism, and the gang system

within the prison actually appears to reduce the terrorist ideology.

Moving to a European case, Orla Lynch discusses both the theoretical and practical differences in the terms “desistance” and “deradicalisation” in her piece titled “Desistance and Deradicalisation: The case of Northern Ireland.” Drawing from case examples of Northern Ireland and the peace process that occurred there, Lynch contextualizes the discussion of desistance from terrorism in a broader criminological framework—noting that terrorist activities are not always violent acts, but also include major crimes such as money laundering and weapons trade as well as other minor criminal offenses.

The essay by Ines Marchand and Marie Denov titled “The Evolving Identities of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia” summarizes the research findings from interviews during training program for former child soldiers. The research highlights some of the main reasons these individuals joined the fighting forces in Colombia, including abduction, coercion, lack of education and/or job opportunities, financial rewards, as well as power and/or self-worth. From a gender perspective, some young girls also joined because they were valued as equal to men. The research also carries some connotations for the reintegration process for former soldiers, noting that former fighters often struggle with their own identity after reintegration, as the community does not always accept them back.

Rounding out the section on disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration, Daniel Koehler describes the important role of families in his essay titled “Family Counseling, De-radicalization and Counter-Terrorism: The Danish and German programs in context.” Koehler argues that families are important in terms of identifying early signs of radicalization as well as in intervening before an individual commits an act of terrorism. Koehler highlights two existing family counseling models in Europe as examples of CVE interven-

tion programming in Denmark and Germany.

#### **Part 4: Involving the Community in Countering Violent Extremism**

The final section presents two case studies from the United States that evaluate different CVE interventions that focus on different aspects of a community. One essay focuses on engaging with non-state actors within the community, namely families, community leaders and youth. The other essay presents community engagement and CVE from a law enforcement perspective, highlighting the differences in community policing for CVE and community policing in general. While the cases in this section are limited to a US-context, the research has direct links to programming and policy that could be applied outside the context of the United States.

The essay by Michael Williams, John Horgan and William Evans titled “Lessons from a US Study Revealing the Critical Role of ‘Gatekeepers’ in Public Safety Networks for Countering Violent Extremism” highlights which individuals in the

community might be best poised to intervene in the process of radicalization of an individual. The study draws from evidence from two locations: Los Angeles and metro Washington, D.C. Based on semi-structured interviews and online surveys, the research highlights that peers are the most crucial gatekeepers, more so than teachers, clergy or family members.

Stevan Weine and Ahmed Younis’ essay “Developing CVE Programs through Building Community Policing Capacities,” reports on research into law enforcement and criminal justice approaches to CVE in the context of Los Angeles. The researcher worked with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to highlight some of the key differences between community policing techniques, and community policing for CVE-purposes. Among the challenges to CVE community policing is that of community buy-in. Often the Muslim community in LA felt that the police department’s CVE programs were intrusive and discriminatory, and that radicalization was not always a priority for the communities that were being engaged by the police force.

#### **Conclusion**

As global trends impact on the every changing nature of the threat of violent extremism, so should the research that supports the development of new programs and policies. The CVE Research Conference 2014 presented a platform for the continued discussion around the latest data available in academic and practitioner-focused research. The essays in this volume, it is hoped, will continue to impact and influence the development of effective CVE programming and good practice.

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## **PART I**

Assessing the Local Push and Pull Factors  
Leading to Radicalization and Recruitment



## Western European Foreign Fighters in Syria: An overview

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**KEYWORDS:** *foreign fighters, Syria, radicalization*

The presence of Western Europeans among the militant extremist groups that are participating in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict – especially the Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra – has been the subject of much attention. Yet, media reporting on the subject is often anecdotal and sensationalist. The purpose of this paper is to provide an evidence-based overview of the phenomenon, addressing key questions such as: how many have traveled; what messages compel them to go; what do they do in Syria/Iraq; and – of course – what will happen when they return.

This paper draws on relevant academic literature, credible reporting, and – of course – the in-depth research carried out by researchers at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), which included the creation of a nearly 700 strong database containing the social media profiles of Western fighters, more than 50 interviews and/or conversations with fighters (typically via private messaging services) and field research in Turkish border towns from where the majority of foreign fighters transfer into Syria. This paper will only be able to offer a snapshot of what is a complex and fast-evolving phenomenon, and therefore the policy recommendations – with which the paper will conclude – need to be read with this caveat in mind.

### How many Western Foreign European Foreign Fighters?

Since April 2013, ICSR has regularly published estimates on the numbers of foreign fighters in Sunni extremist organization in the Syrian (now Syrian/Iraqi) conflict. The latest figures were released by the ICSR team at the Munich Security Conference in February 2015 (Neumann, 2015). They show that the number of Western European fighters has risen from 500 in April 2013 to nearly 4,000 – an eight-fold increase in less than two years. The largest European countries – France (1,200), Britain (500-600), and Germany (both 500-600) – account for more than half of the total. But it is smaller, especially northern European, countries that seem to be disproportionately affected: Belgium (440), the Netherlands (200-

250), Sweden (150-180), Denmark (100-150), and Austria (100-150) have all produced as many – in some cases, more – foreign fighters *per capita* than their larger neighbors. Also represented are Spain (50-100), Italy (80), Finland (50-70), Norway (60), Switzerland (40), and Ireland (26) (Countries with less than 10 fighters were not listed.)

Grasping the scale of mobilization can be difficult. In each of the countries above, the Syrian/Iraqi conflict has produced more foreign fighters than any *single* conflict since the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. In many countries, especially the smaller ones, it has mobilized more than in all of them *combined*. Western Europe-

ans now represent around 20 per cent of the estimated current total of 18,000 fighters from outside Syria and Iraq. What's more, the conflict is well on track to becoming the most significant mobilization of Sunni foreign fighters since the Second World War. According to the Norwegian researcher Thomas Hegghammer (2010, p. 61), only the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s has attracted more foreigners – up to 20,000 – albeit over an entire decade.

The Afghanistan analogy is important. It was during the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s that many of the individuals who went on to form al Qaeda first met, gained military training and came up with the idea of creating a network of fighters that could be deployed wherever “Muslim lands” were occupied or “apostate” dictators needed to be overthrown. From Bosnia and Algeria to Chechnya and the Philippines, the so-called “Arab Afghans” were featured in nearly every conflict in the Muslim world in the 1990s and 2000s (Hamid & Farrall, 2015). Even the September 11 attacks in 2001 can be traced to Afghan networks (Wright, 2007), underlining the longevity of the potential threat; if the analogy is accurate, some of the foreigners that are fighting in Syria and Iraq today will be of concern for a generation to come.

### **What messages make them go?**

Western Europeans have been drawn into the conflict for different reasons. For younger men in particular, the notion of adventure clearly seems to be important. The conflict offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to “hang out with the brothers”, fight for a cause, and – possibly – become a hero. In 2013, many Western fighters in Syria were posting pictures and videos that articulated the notion of a “5 star jihad.” They showed young European men standing on the battlefield, RPG's over their shoulders, maiming and killing the enemy, but also sitting next to swimming pools, playing snooker in abandoned villas, and eating chocolate bars and potato chips. The message was

simple: come and join us, this will be the greatest adventure of your life. Indeed, the “5 star jihad” theme was so successful that some groups had to make statements, explaining what the struggle was all about and telling recruits that they were not welcome unless they took their faith seriously.

Among the most compelling narratives, especially in the first two years of the conflict, was the idea of “fighting against existential threat,” which has been an important mobilizing theme for foreign fighters across cultures and ages (Malet, 2013). Countless videos and speeches were articulating the idea of a Shiite conspiracy – led by Syrian president Bashar al Assad, and supported by the governments of Iran and Iraq as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah – intent on eliminating the Sunni people of Syria. Pictures showing Sunni civilians being killed, tortured and raped resonated strongly with many of the European fighters that we have monitored through social networks. They not only created a sense of anger – both at Assad for carrying out these crimes, and the West for being silent and passive – but also one of urgency. If calling oneself Muslim had any meaning, so the argument went, this was the moment to show it. Fighting in Syria was seen as legitimate and defensive, and had nothing to do with terrorism. Nor, in fact, was it initially perceived as anti-Western, since the United States and European countries had declared their opposition to Assad as well.

Gradually, though, the (more or less defensive) notion of saving one's “brothers and sisters” from being exterminated has made way for a more offensive idea, that of (re-)creating a Caliphate. Ever since extremist groups have started holding territories in the north and east of Syria and created their own systems of governance and implementing, the prospect of helping to migrate to, build, and live in a perfect “Islamic State” has fueled the imagination of many Western recruits. Even before the “Islamic State” declared its caliphate, many Europeans who had moved to Syria burned their (Western) passports, making it clear that they had no intention of returning to their

home countries. The quick military victories during the summer of 2014 seemed to confirm the sense of destiny and momentum among potential recruits, demonstrating that they were involved in a historical mission – the re-building of the Caliphate – that “people in a thousand years” would still be talking about. It became an attractive vision both for ideologically hardened extremists and those who were looking to fill their lives with meaning and significance (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2010, p. 153-166).

Finally, since the beginning of coalition airstrikes in August 2014, we have seen evidence of the traditional “West vs. Islam” rhetoric which had been difficult to apply to a conflict in which Western powers were trying hard not to become involved. Going to Syria and Iraq has, yet again, become a means of fighting America which, they argue, is hoping to “occupy and colonize” Muslim lands.

### **What do they do in Syria?**

Having decided to become “migrants,” virtually all potential fighters make their way to Turkey from where they transfer into Syria. Before joining the group, they typically have to stay in safe houses on either side of the border and subject themselves to various checks and tests. The purpose is to find out whether recruits’ motivations are sincere and to what extent they can be useful to the group. Over the course of the conflict, the groups have become more rigorous, and we know of cases where recruits had to “apply” to several groups before eventually being able to join.

Although the vast majority of (male) recruits have ambitions to become fighters, not every foreigner is used in combat. This is particularly true for Westerners and Europeans of whom only a small minority has any military training or experience, which – in any case – tends to pale in comparison to the Chechens, Libyans, or Iraqis who have fought in insurgencies gaining reputations for being physically fit and battle-hardened. Europeans often do jobs based on their civilian skills and

training. If someone used to work as a car mechanic, he will be used in a similar capacity by the “Islamic State,” fixing technical equipment or teaching people how to operate military equipment. If he is good with computers or writing, he may join the social media department, helping to produce videos and websites aimed at intimidating Western audiences and promoting the group’s message back in a Western context.

Where Europeans are used in the military proper, it is often for low-level military duties that require little skills and come with no great responsibilities. They receive one or two weeks military training and are then deployed on guard duty, standing at fixed positions for hours on end, often with specific instructions not to fire their weapons but alert other, presumably more experienced, operators should threats arise. For many Western fighters, this is a source of frustration. They often arrive in Syria with high expectations, thinking they will be involved in combat and take part in daring raids and adventures. The mundane realities of (low level) military service has caused some to feel undervalued and become disillusioned. In a number of cases, people have volunteered to act as couriers, going back to their European home countries to raise money and buy essential equipment, as illustrated in *Der Generalbundesanwalt v. Ismail Issa, Mohammed Ayubi, and Ezzedinne Issa, ‘Anklageschrift’* (2014).

The lack of fighting and language skills – many Europeans do not speak Arabic – limits their utility in military terms. On the other hand, it is precisely those recruits who are frequently used for excessively violent operations: acts of torture, beheadings, and – of course – suicide operations. From the groups’ perspective, foreigners who do not speak the local language, have no ties to local populations, and have come to Syria on purely ideological grounds are also the most dependent and, therefore, obedient. While doing fieldwork near the Syrian border, several fighters told us that Syrians would often refuse to become involved in executions and suicide operations arguing that

these tactics had “nothing to do with the kind of Islam that’s been practiced in Syria for centuries.” Foreigners, by contrast, are disproportionately represented among the suicide bombers, and have a near monopoly when it comes to involvement in beheadings and executions.

### What happens when they return?

One of the most contentious questions among European policymakers is how to deal with fighters who return to their home countries. Yet it is far from certain how many will return, and how many of those will pose a terrorism threat. Significant numbers will die. For example, among the British fighters, for whom we track death notices, the share of “martyrs” has risen to as much as 10 per cent of the national contingent (Gani & Mallik, 2014). Others will try to stay in the conflict zone, having married or become committed to the idea of building the “Islamic State.” Yet others will attempt to move to other conflict zones, migrate to places where jihadist groups have affiliated themselves to al Qaeda or the “Islamic State,” or – simply – get stuck in Turkey and other transit countries. This doesn’t render them harmless, quite the contrary, but it is unlikely they will pose an *immediate* threat to their home countries.

Of those who manage to return, a “dangerous minority” will commit acts of terrorism. The two rigorous academic studies that have examined the “veteran effect” among “jihadist” foreign fighters in previous conflicts both found that a majority of returnees (88 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) do not become involved in terrorism (Hegghammer, 2013 pp. 1-15; Klausen & Roach, 2014), while the minority (12 and 25 per cent) tends to be more dangerous: they often have military skills (however rudimentary), are brutalized, and have become part of international networks – all factors that make terrorist plots more viable and lethal (Hegghammer, 2013 pp. 1-15; Klausen & Roach, 2014). It is hard to predict to what extent these findings will be replicated in the current conflict. The notion of a wider struggle for a “Caliphate” and growing Western involvement

may increase the share of those who are determined to carry on the struggle after their return, while smart government responses and a political backlash against groups like the ‘Islamic State’ may help to reduce it. The number of variables is endless, and the future dynamics of the conflict impossible to foresee.

Whatever the long-term trends, the issue is no longer an abstract problem. Nearly every European country from where recruits have “migrated” to Syria has now seen a first wave of returnees. For Germany, the number of Syria returnees was put at 150 (“Syrien-Rückkehrer,” 2014), while in Britain, officials have recently mentioned a figure of 300, half of that country’s contingent (Adesina, 2015). In practically every country in Europe, criminal charges have been brought against Syria returnees, most notably in Belgium where 46 people have been charged in a single trial (Bartunek, 2014). Belgium is also the country where a Syria returnee, Mehdi Nemmouche, has killed four people at a Jewish museum, and another attack is said to have been stopped by a police operation that killed two of the plot’s ringleaders, both Syria ‘veterans’ (“Brussels Jewish Museum Killing,” 2014; Traynor, 2015).

Our own observations suggest that there might be three distinct groups of returnees based on their motivations and experience as part of the conflict. They can be summed up in *three D’s*. The first – the dangerous – have further radicalized and acquired the skills and determination to carry on, rejecting the idea that there exists a distinction between fighting Assad and fighting the West – or *in* the West. The second – the disturbed – suffer from combat related stress and other mental health issues, often as a result of witnessing – or being personally involved in – excessive acts of violence. The final group – the disillusioned – no longer supports the organizations and/or causes they were involved in and want to re-integrate into their home societies. This doesn’t imply that they have ceased being (cognitive) extremists but that – for the time being – the risk of becoming involved in political violence is low (Neumann, 2013).

## Policy recommendations

As this overview has shown, the current Western foreign fighter population in Syria and Iraq is not a monolithic entity. They differ in motivations, roles and experiences during their time in Syria, as well as their reasons for returning. It makes no sense, therefore, to pretend that they can all be tarred with the same brush. Doing so would not be smart, nor would it make European countries any safer.

While there are strong reasons to stop more people from joining the conflict – for example, by temporarily confiscating their passports – the response to returnees needs to be determined by the risk they pose. Where Syria “veterans” are believed to be dangerous, prosecution leading to prison may be the only viable option. Society needs to be protected from the “disturbed” too, though this may involve psychological and, where needed, psychiatric treatment. The “disillusioned,” in turn, may respond to de-radicalisation, intervention and exit programs, such as the ones that already exist in countries like Britain, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. Most important, though, countries need to develop reliable instruments for assessing – and monitoring – the risk, according to which people are categorized as one or the other.

Regardless of the nature of a country’s response, the numbers presented in this paper should make it clear that the foreign fighter issue represents one of the greatest challenges for European intelligence and law enforcement agencies for years to come. It will be one for European societies too: no matter how good a country’s response, there is little doubt that the conflict will have consequences on the streets of Europe too. People’s resilience will determine if the dangerous among the Syria “veterans” can succeed in spreading division and hate not only abroad but also at home.

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## Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Terrorists or freedom fighters?

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**KEYWORDS:** *terrorists, foreign fighters, counter-terrorism*

During the Fourth Review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in summer 2014, it was becoming apparent that the issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) has become a global concern, consuming the attention of a large number of the world's politicians, policy-makers and security personnel. During the Review, United Nations Member States expressed "grave concern over the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, namely individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict, and resolving to address this threat" (United Nations, 2014). Although the flow of national foreign fighters across national territories to participate in war-active zones is not a new phenomenon, and is a problem present in various regions of the world as we will see later in this essay, the issue that seems to concern most Members of the international community at the moment is the issue of FTFs in Syria and Iraq. This was clearly expressed by Member States during the Fourth Review, which was followed by the 2078 Resolution that called upon all Member States to stem the flow of FTFs through collaboration with the United Nations.

The focus on FTFs in Syria and Iraq is not surprising. To begin with, the number of FTFs in Syria and Iraq is much larger than anything seen before. A new report by the United Nations 1267 Monitoring Team concluded that "More than 25,000 foreign fighters from some 100 countries are linked to al Qaeda and Islamic State, with Syria and Iraq comprising a veritable international finishing school for extremists" ("Syria, Iraq," 2015). Put differently, the phenomenon of FTFs today affects more than half of United Nations Member States. Second, the level of brutality expressed by some of the groups which FTFs are joining in Syria and Iraq is unprecedented by any other rebel groups. This includes decapitation, kidnapping, assassination, suicide bombing, burning detainees alive, destroying archeological and historical heritage, and brutal killings of the perceived 'enemy.' The United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, described such acts as "unspeakable atrocities," ("Ban Ki-Moon," 2015) adding that "I am especially outraged by the reports from Iraq of brutal killing of civilians by ISIL" (Berwani, 2014).

But the concern regarding FTFs for many countries is over the question of what will happen to them, or rather what they will do after their return to their home countries: How radicalized will they be by then, particularly after experiencing, if not participating in the fighting themselves in Syria and Iraq? How many of them represent a real and present danger to their home countries and societies after returning from war-zones? How many of them will be genuine repents and how many will attempt to perpetrate terrorist acts? What is the best approach to rehabilitate them and reintegrate them into their society and families? What exactly should we do with them? Obviously, much of our actions and policies will depend on the answers to these important questions. For now, most of us simply do not "know what to do with them" ("Emrah and his Brothers," 2015).

This essay thus fills an important gap in the literature by discussing the issue of FTFs in Syria and Iraq. In particular, it focuses on exactly how much knowledge we actually have about these individuals, asking “where do they come from?”, “what motivates them to fight?” and “what causes them to repent and return home?” The essay ends with a small section on the main challenges that the international community faces/will face in rehabilitating and reintegrating those FTF returnees. The essay concludes with a summary and recommendations.

Information obtained directly from Member States, particularly regarding the number and characteristics of FTFs, represent the major source of information for this essay. This information has been obtained during country visits or direct contacts with officials in those states via telephone calls or emails. The essay also relies on other official publications published by the UN, national governments and the media to support its analysis.

### **What Do We Know About FTFs: Where Do They Come From?**

The only area where the issue of FTFs phenomenon commands some sort of an agreement is over the relatively large number of those fighters and where they come from. While agreeing however that the number of FTFs in Syria and Iraq is relatively large, there is a disagreement over their exact numbers. The most recent estimate is the one given by the United Nations Monitoring Team, which was mentioned in the previous section and which put the number of FTFs at more than 25,000 from over 100 countries. However, the report adds that 25,000 is the total number of FTFs all over the world, and that there are “some 22,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq” alone (Nichols, 2015).

Such ambiguities characterize most reports on FTFs. In his recent (2014) report on FTFs, Richard Barrett, the former head of the 1267 Monitoring Team and currently senior vice president in the Soufan Group, gives completely different statistics for FTFs in Syria and Iraq:

*It is reasonable to conclude that at least 12,000 foreigners have fought in Syria over the first three years of the war. This compares with an equally imprecise estimate of 10,000 for the whole ten-year period of the Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation plus the period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 (Barrett, 2014, p. 14).*

Our own estimates, obtained directly from the capitals of the countries where most FTFs originate, are closer to the figures given by Barrett. These are given in Table 1 below. The Table gives an idea about why it is so difficult to agree on one figure related to FTFs in Syria and Iraq. For a start, these numbers are not stable: they keep on changing on an almost weekly basis, and mostly in an upward direction. According to Belgium officials, two individuals leave Belgium on a weekly basis to join the fighting in Syria. That is, on average eight Belgians leave for Syria on a monthly basis, and 96 leave on a yearly basis. So far, and as Table 1 demonstrates, the number of FTFs in Syria and Iraq can be modestly estimated at just over 13,000. These figures, as already stated earlier, are obtained directly from counter terrorism officials in the capitals of countries from whence those fighters came. They can therefore be taken as the most accurate available to date on FTFs.

Even our figures (in Table 1) are not problem-free. This is not only because these figures keep on changing constantly, but also because they include the number of FTFs from countries for which there is no relevant documentation. There is another unknown number of FTFs who come from 52 other countries known to have FTFs going to Syria and Iraq, but for whom any figures are una-

available. Those countries, however, are not known to have large numbers of FTFs (Barrett, 2014, p. 14). There is a consensus that the countries represented in Table 1 are the largest providers of FTFs in the world today.

It is obvious from Table 1 that the largest number of FFs come from the Arab World. In particular, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco are the four largest providers of FTFs in the Middle East and the Levant. These four countries alone provide more than 90 per cent of all Arab FTFs in Syria and Iraq.

It is equally interesting to note that the largest number of FTFs joining the war in Syria and Iraq come from the Arab North African region (Tunisia and Morocco). If the unknown number of Algerian and Libyan fighters is included, then the prominence of North Africa as a provider of FTFs becomes even more significant.

Tunisia and Morocco are particularly interesting cases. The latter skilfully avoided the political upheavals and instabilities associated with Arab revolts which started in late 2010 and seems to have peacefully achieved a calm transition to a more politically open system. The former, however, is the country where the Arab Revolt began before it spread to other Arab States. All observers today regard Tunisia as a country: “stand[ing] as an exception in the Arab world for having peacefully completed a democratic electoral process, four years after the downfall of its dictator” (“The Guardian view,” 2014). Some now fear that the large exodus of such a large number of FTFs might unsettle the country’s democratic transition and destabilize its political system, particularly if these fighters return home with more radicalized ideas and ideologies. Certainly, such fears have been intensified following the recent “assault on the Bardo Museum in March 2015” (Durac, 2015). This was preceded by violence in the wake of a prominent leftist politician’s assassination in early February 2013, namely Chokri Belaid. Such incidents have not only “triggered a showdown within the

**TABLE 1:** Numbers and Origins of Foreign Fighters

Country	Nos. In Syria	No of Returnees
<b>MENA</b>		
Saudi Arabia	3000 (March 2015)	300
Algeria	200 (April 2014)	
Tunisia	2000-3000	400-500
Jordan	2000	150
Morocco	1193	277
Turkey	700	700 extradited by May (2015)
<b>Total MENA</b>		9,093-10,093
<b>ASIA</b>		
Indonesia	20-30 (May 2014)	
Malaysia	67	
Singapore	1 (May 2014)	
Australia	250 (April 2014)	
The Russian Federation	More than 800	
<b>Total Asia</b>		1,138-1,148
<b>WESTERN EUROPE</b>		
Belgium	350	
Denmark	100 (May 2014)	

Finland	70 (April 2015)	
France	700 (Only 275 still in Syria in April 2014)	
Germany	300 (March 2014)	245
Bosnia and Hertz.	100	
Kosovo	100-120 (April 2015)	
The Netherlands	120	
Norway	40-50	
N. Ireland	25-30 (April 2015)	
Switzerland	66	3
Sweden	260	100
Spain	51 (May 2014)	
UK	400 (May 2014)	160 (May 2015)
<b>Total W. Europe 2,592-2,612</b>		
<b>NORTH AMERICA</b>		
Canada	66	6 (May 2015)
USA	150	
<b>Total N. America 216</b>		
<b>TOTAL 13,039</b>		

**Source:** All figures for 2014 from Barrett, 2014. The rest are taken directly from officials of governments in those capitals.

ruling Islamic Ennahda Party between its moderate and fundamentalist wings but also deepened the hostility between secularists and Islamists within Tunisian society” (Ottaway, 2013). There is evidence to believe that some members of the Museum attackers were trained abroad, particularly in Libya. It is no exaggeration therefore to say that the issue of FTFs might be one of the most serious challenges facing Tunisia’s, and other Arab states’ nascent democratic processes.

Second, Europe also provides a large number of FTFs, second to the Arab States. So far, Europe has provided more than 2600 FTFs to Syria and Iraq. This moves the fight closer to Europe. Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, European fighters have been travelling less to such once-popular areas like Afghanistan, the mountains of Pakistan and Somalia and are instead going in increasing numbers to Syria and Iraq, which is only a few hours flight away from the EU. Little is still known about what motivates those fighters to leave the EU and join the war in Syria. This has led to the launching currently of several new studies on the motivations of FTFs, including by the United Nations itself, which launched probably the largest study on FTFs earlier this year. In time, this will help improve our understanding for the FTFs phenomenon and will help in developing more effective strategies to stem the flow of FTFs.

However, make no mistake about it: the radicalization of European FTFs did not happen overnight. These home-grown European fighters are the products of European societies and they should be seen as such. A great deal of the explanation for their radicalization and motivation to migrate to Syria and Iraq must be found in their home European countries. This is the case to a large extent, although not solely. External factors can, and have intensified the pressure to migrate to the region. As a German observer put it, they leave Germany, and other European countries, “because they are unsuccessful there” and because they “want to make history, if not in Germany then in the Middle East, as the first generation in a new caliphate,

even though... most of them are theological and ideological illiterates” (Ozlem, 2015).

Third, it is not clear who these FTFs are joining while in Syria. It is true that three designated terrorist organizations have attracted the overwhelming majority of foreign fighters. These are: Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and the Greater Syria (ISIS). However, not only has in-fighting so far characterized the relationship between these three main groups, but there are foreign fighters who are also joining other groups too, like the Kurdish Beshmerqha, the Syrian regime’s army, Hezbollah, the Shi’ats, and Yazidiz, and the Christian minorities. There are also FTFs who are joining other war-zone areas in different parts of the world. The total number of FTFs that are currently involved in fighting for one group or another around the world, according to the same UN Report mentioned earlier, exceeds 30,000 individuals. As a Canadian researcher noticed: “There are also dozens of other Canadians who have fought in Sri Lanka, Somalia, Israel, and Afghanistan with largely nationalist motivations. Thus far, very few of them have been involved with terrorist attacks on Canadian soil.” We return to this last point in the next section.

Fourth, there is a relatively large number of female FTFs among this new wave of violent extremists. According to the ICCT (2015), there are at least “550 Western women in IS-controlled territory” today, twenty per cent of which are British. These are mostly young women who have left their homes and families to travel to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. This does not include the number of Arab women who joined one of the major rebel groups in Syria and Iraq, whose numbers are equally difficult to estimate.

Finally, there is a relatively increasing number of FTFs who are also voluntarily choosing to return to their homes and families after spending some time in Syria and Iraq. They are disillusioned fighters who have chosen to return to their European countries after being disenchanted with

what they saw and with their experience with the groups they fought for while in Syria and Iraq. Their exact number is also inaccurately reported, but they easily exceed 1,400 so far around the world (Table 1).

### **Reformed Fighters or Potential Killers?**

As more are expected to return to their home societies, the key questions which today occupy the minds of most state officials and security personnel are the following: Who are those returning FTFs? What threat do they pose to their home societies? How radicalized have they become or are they? In a recent article on FTFs, a German journalist captured those key questions: “Are they reformed fighters? Or are these young men potential killers, members of terrorist sleeper cells who pose a mortal threat to their home, European countries?” (Ozlem, 2015). Obviously, the answer to the above-mentioned questions, in addition to the question of what to do with the returning FTFs, will shape our actions and policy responses. They are the subject of the next section.

It is much harder for female FTFs to return home once they have entered a war-zone area like Syria or Iraq. Once there, their movement is far more restricted, often requiring permission from their husbands or care-takers, their movements are more easily spotted and the logistics of departing a war zone is far more strenuous and complicated not only due to physical and geographical reasons, but also due to limited knowledge of the place and limited connections they often harbor whilst there, which could facilitate their return to their home country. Not surprisingly, the number of female fighters who have already returned to their homes is very limited. This is certainly the case when compared with the number of male FTFs returnees.

The motivations for joining the war in Syria and Iraq varies so greatly that it is almost impossible to make any sweeping generalizations. Those should be avoided. What is important to remember here,

as the anthropologist Scott Atran told the United Nations Security Council recently:

*There's nothing all that unusual about ISIS members. Perhaps understandably, people like to sweep members of groups like ISIS into undesirable categories, saying that they're all crazy or psychotic, for example. But time and time again, research has shown this to be false; normal-seeming people join radical movements all the time and do remarkably vicious things once they're there. The same holds for ISIS members (Atran, 2015).*

As alluded to earlier in this essay and pointed out by other scholars like Mark Sageman, for example, whenever and wherever there were injustices, whether real or perceived, certain individuals motivated by empathy, compassion, idealism, and the desire to help others take action to correct what they perceive as injustices. This was the case in Nazi Germany, Cuba's Castro, South Africa under the apartheid, Afghanistan during the Russian invasion, and Israel in its wars against the Arabs (Sageman, 2008). Israel calls the equivalent of its own FTFs "Lone Soldiers." Today, the Israeli Army itself "reports 4,600 foreign Lone Soldiers currently serving" in its ranks, "over one-third of whom are American (it is unclear how many hold dual citizenship)" (Malet, 2014).

Although research on FTFs remains at its infancy, there is an agreement that: "As many scholars have noted, there is no one single profile of these individuals – their ethnic, cultural, economic, and religious backgrounds are varied and diverse." The same applies for female FTFs. A recent report the London-based Institute of Strategic Dialogue described the 100 known female FTFs in the following words: "It really debunks the stereotypes," said ISD senior researcher Erin Saltman. "The ages range from 13 to 40, with a range of education and professions and families. It's very complicated" (Shubert 2015).

Some are no doubt motivated by ideology. This is perhaps the case with the very top leadership of ISIS and Al-Nusra. But, most of the foot sol-

diers lack even basic knowledge of Islam and have more varied and diversified motivations. As Scott Atran stated in his Security Council speech:

*None of the ISIS fighters we interviewed in Iraq had more than primary school education, some had wives and young children. When asked 'what is Islam?' they answered 'my life.' They knew nothing of the Quran or Hadith, or of the early caliphs Omar and Othman, but had learned of Islam from Al Qaeda and ISIS propaganda, teaching that Muslims like them were targeted for elimination unless they first eliminated the impure (Atran, 2015).*

Such calls to radicalize and recruit individuals are more likely to succeed in countries characterized by injustices, bad governances, marginalization of groups, and social, political and economic exclusion, and marginalization. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somali, and places characterized by foreign occupation are prime examples of such places. Even in the case of FTFs from Western countries, such as the European Union and Australia for example, it has been pointed out time and again that the failure of integration policies in such places facilitate recruitment and radicalization. It is now officially recognized that the rise of Islamophobia in these countries is compounded by the fact that Muslim communities are among the most disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunities, educational level, political representation, wage differentiation, and job opportunities. What matters is not simply the conditions of the individuals who join violent extremist groups, but rather the communities where they come from. In short, both internal and external factors combine to radicalize and recruit for violent extremist actions and organizations.

Such radicalizing conditions were, and continue to be available in Iraq and Syria under al-Maliki and Assad:

*First cause is al Maliki's wrong policy towards the Sunni minority. After the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq, al Maliki started to resort to more authoritarian*



*leadership than before. He excluded Sunnis from power and favored Shias. He began to get rid of any opposing voices, particularly Sunnis, in the government, starting by arresting his Sunni vice president Hashimi (Laissof 2014).*

Young age and the role played by group dynamics and friendship networks in influencing their decision to fight abroad are seen to be common characteristics of almost all foreign fighters. This is the case with FFs coming from Canada, the UK, Australia, Germany and the USA to mention just a few examples. According to one source, about 3 out of every 4 people who join Al Qaeda or ISIS do so through friends, most of the rest through family or fellow travelers in search of a meaningful path in life. It is rare, though, that parents are ever aware that their children desire to join the movement (Atran, 2015).

As pointed out earlier, some FTFs have either returned to their home countries, or are trying to return home. Countries' responses and attitudes towards returning FTFs have varied. Most countries have so far issued new regulations that criminalizes FTFs, ramps up security measures and further empowers security personnel. Such approaches are not likely to make us safer today. They deal with the symptoms, but do not address the root causes of the problem. They might prevent an individual from joining a war abroad by arresting him/her, but they will not stop others from trying. Nor do they tell us anything on why individuals choose to leave prosperous societies to join uncertainty and even die fighting a foreign war. It is doubtful whether such reactive approaches can arrest more people than the ones they could end up radicalizing.

Before criminalizing the acts of FTFs in summer 2014, 150 Jordanian fighters returned home, after being disillusioned and descanted with their experience in Syria. After the new regulations were introduced, not one single fighter returned. In other words, simply ramping up security measures and criminalizing their acts is pushing FTFs in one

direction: dead-enders. Such policies are bound to further radicalize them, their friends and their family members (El-Said, 2015).

Many countries have not criminalized the acts of FTFs who continue to be free to move in and out of those countries as they wish. Sweden and Norway are among those countries. Those countries today appear less vulnerable to violent extremism than those which ramped up their security forces and criminalized FTFs' acts and actions. As the Canadian academic pointed out, "Thus far, very few of them [returning FTFs] have been involved with terrorist attacks." And most terrorist attacks that have been committed by FTFs have actually taken place in countries that ramped up their security measures and criminalized FTFs' acts as a countenance measure. These include Australia, Canada, Belgium, France and the UK (El Said, 2015).

At least three challenges are faced by returning FTFs and their home countries. Dealing with these challenges can go a long way towards fashioning effective reintegrating and rehabilitation policies and programs.

First, returning FTFs return home because of their disillusionment and disappointment with life abroad and the tactics of those organizations they fought for. They provide an excellent way to counter the narrative of radicals and undermine recruitment of youth into violent extremist organizations. Once they return to their countries, however, their peaceful reintegration is faced with a mountain of challenges. One of the challenges they face was publicized in a letter a German FTF returnee addressed to the Interior Ministry of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia: "I don't have a job or a qualification, and I have zero prospects in the job market" (Ozlem, 2015). Most also have no savings or assets to fall back on after their return and the new ramping up of legislations which criminalizes FTFs only makes their reintegration more difficult. The same German FTF gives a good indication of how policy-makers should re-

act to his case: Please “help people like me.”

Second, in addition to legislative obstacles, the returning FTFs face continuous pressure from the radical violent extremist movements and ideologies not to repent, not to give up on their beliefs, and to try to convince them that their perseverance will soon be rewarded. They know that detained FTFs will eventually be released and, if not rehabilitated and successfully reintegrated, they will continue to remain vulnerable to violent extremist acts and ideologies. They continue to compete therefore with state and its apparatus for the hearts and minds of returning FTFs. This is not simply a matter of a counter narrative exercise.

In fact, our counter narrative is very negative and in some cases is actually counter-productive. Is it realistic that our counter narrative is focused on telling our youth that “do you know that ISIS decapitates peoples” heads and that they commit

crimes? Is that where you want to go?” Do they not know that? A teenage girl from a Chicago suburb who was stopped by the FBI from flying to Syria responded to such a question by saying “Well, what about the barrel bombings that kill thousands? Maybe if the beheading helps to stop that” (Atran, 2015). Only by making a real difference for the youth on the grounds and providing them with dignified alternative opportunities we can successfully counter the violent extremist narratives.

Finally, returning FTFs face challenges from their own wider society. Marginalized, stigmatized and labelled by misinformed and misplaced reactive regulations and the media, most members of societies want nothing to do with them. This places greater pressure on the communities where these fighters come from, and particularly from their mothers and family members who are concerned for their safety. The implications of this calls for a stronger engagement with all community members.

## Conclusion

FTFs are the product of their own societies in the first place. Their radicalization and participation in wars abroad is caused by pressures faced in their own societies first, combined with external pressures to do the right thing and help others. Their reintegration back into their own societies faces serious challenges. Reactive regulatory policies are one major challenge. The lack of proper understanding for the conditions conducive to radicalization and participation in foreign wars is another. A third challenge is lack of alternative dignified opportunities, coupled with a society that wants very little with them. There is a need to reinvest in and reactivate the Prevent pillar of our strategies, which relies more on community engagement as one of the most powerful soft instruments available to immune our societies from the dangers of radicalization and extremism that lead to terrorism. This essay also makes a strong case for the promotion of good governance, the rule of law and human rights as the key pillar of any prevention of violent extremism. In addition to promoting good governance, the rule of law and human rights, solving prolonged and unresolved conflicts, particularly in countries where the ancestors of most FTFs originate from will go along way towards reducing the external drivers of radicalisation. In short, there is a need to move from countering terrorism to preventing violent extremism, not only in Western societies but also in the Middle East and North Africa where most of FTFs either come or originated from.

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# From Policy to Practice: Findings and lessons learned from a research-based pilot countering violent extremism programme in the Horn of Africa

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**KEYWORDS:** *violent extremism, radicalisation, recruitment, prevention, youth, women, diaspora, law enforcement, civil society, empirical research.*

The essay will take as its starting point the European Union (EU)-funded Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) Horn of Africa programme. STRIVE is a pilot designed to test assumptions around what works in countering violent extremism (CVE) in the Horn of Africa, as well as to build the evidence base to support recommendations for future programming. This essay will outline the four core areas underpinning STRIVE – a) law enforcement and civil-society relations, b) the role of women, c) the role of diaspora, and d) youth marginalisation – and consider these in the context of a summary of recent findings from research and pilot activities around recruitment to violent groups and radicalisation in the region. The essay will emphasise research methodologies, considerations and challenges within an overall framework of moving from policy to practice. Finally, the essay will stress the fact that a narrow CVE focus is new in the Horn of Africa and that there is a significant need for more methodological innovation, creative programming and flexible donors, with many research gaps to be filled. STRIVE Horn of Africa (HoA) is the first in a series of global, EU funded research-based pilot programmes focusing on CVE.

## Background

STRIVE HoA is implemented by the British-registered think tank the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), which specialises in defence and security policy. STRIVE is implemented from the regional RUSI office in Nairobi. The purpose of STRIVE is to develop best practice to implement and monitor CVE programmes in the HoA. The starting point for the programme is that CVE is not the responsibility of any one institution. Various actors have a role to play in the continuum between civil society and law enforcement in order to contribute to countering the process of radicalisation towards use of violence and to facilitating returning fighters' re-integration.

STRIVE is focused around four result centered

areas, all primarily preventative in nature. The areas are:

- **Result Area 1:** Building the regional capacity of security sector and law enforcement authorities to engage with civil society in fighting violent extremism.
- **Result Area 2:** Strengthening the capacity of women's organisations in Puntland and Somaliland to fight violent extremism.
- **Result area 3:** Increasing the understanding of the challenges faced by EU-born Somali Youth in Somaliland.

- **Result area 4:** Increasing the understanding of the drivers of radicalisation among youth in Kenya.

Geographically, STRIVE covers Ethiopia, Kenya, Puntland, South Central Somalia and Somaliland, with a primary initial focus on Kenya, Puntland and Somaliland. STRIVE is a 36-month pilot and was initiated in January 2014. The first period was utilised to establish the office and undertake research into the four result areas before initiating series of 2-3-month pilot activities testing the programme's underlying assumptions.

### **CVE research in the HoA**

When analysing the process of radicalisation towards the use of violence, socioeconomic vulnerabilities and motivating factors can only be understood in relation to local, regional and global politics. Therefore, research must place the process of radicalisation within such a framework, bearing in mind that the politics are constantly changing and will contribute to changing patterns of radicalisation and recruitment to violent groups, and to changing overall narratives relating to these elements.

This section is based on examples from research undertaken as a part of STRIVE. The research aims to inform understanding of radicalisation process in each specific location and support the development of pilot activities which are as responsive as possible to the current situation.

### **The Role of the Diaspora**

The first example looks at the role of Diaspora in Somaliland and explores the assumption that Diaspora youth are vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups when visiting Somaliland from abroad. The research was carried out by a team based in Hargeisa and the researchers responsible for data collection had a connection or affiliation to the areas where they collected the data. Different team members collected data in different areas

to increase access. They were in daily contact and briefed each other on progress and preliminary findings. The research was led by a senior international consultant specialising in research into sensitive issues.

The data was collected according to a semi-structured interview guide developed in collaboration with the STRIVE team, but was constantly adapted to the specific interview. The research team introduced the study in interview situations as a study on social, educational, religious and cultural trends in Somaliland in order to mitigate any risk for the research team and to allow for increased confidence on the part of the interviewee. It was, however, agreed with the team that interviews should be concluded if the interviewee was reluctant to participate. On occasions, the interviews were repeated and took shape as conversations over several meetings.

The findings from the study were rich, but for the purposes of this essay the main relevant finding was that youth amongst the host population is equally vulnerable to being attracted to the external narrative, and that the host population in some cases was inspired by the Diaspora narrative and promotion of violence, rather than vice versa. This finding points to the fact that conservative and traditional practice of religion is different to radicalisation and Islamic extremism, which in Somaliland appears to be a modern phenomenon. One of the key lessons drawn from the findings was the need to adapt the programme to focus on relations between the two groups, rather than engaging with one primarily.

### **The Role of Women in Violent Extremism and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia**

The second example looks at improving understanding of the role of women in violent extremism and consequently in countering violent extremism. The aim behind the project is to understand how mothers, sisters, wives, girlfriends,

cousins and peers are engaged (if at all) in the process of recruitment, and how they are affected by or contribute to radicalisation. The assumption is that they must be aware when a relative or friend changes their views, behaviour and/or social network. The studies strove to unpack what they do with this information and how a project focusing on countering violent extremism could engage with women as a part of a preventative effort.

At the time of writing, a study in Somaliland and one in Puntland are ongoing. The studies are being carried out by local researchers in Somaliland and Puntland and are limited to pre-agreed locations. The study was designed in collaboration with the researchers, and interviewees included teachers, madrasa teachers, imams, women's groups, elders, women's representatives in community groups and knowledgeable persons in each location. As such, the studies were not necessarily with affected women themselves, so a follow-up study with them would be useful for further analysis.

The preliminary findings indicate that women are engaged in a subtle manner in both locations. Their social relations and interactions in the community are utilised by groups using violence as a means to express their views to influence and recruit, sometimes without the women being aware of this. Often the women are approached by individuals appearing stereotypically religious in their appearance and with religious authority from a nearby mosque. The women are financially compensated for engaging with nearby households to get their children to attend a certain madrasa or collect money for a certain mosque.

Sometimes the women's engagement is more direct, involving hosting travelling members of the movement and assisting with hidden operations. The research also shows that women are perceived to be less likely to be involved than men, so engaging women can be a safer way of operating. The programming lessons from the research show that the challenges are significant, but that a starting point could be working with women's organi-

sations active in these locations to raise their understanding of the problem and work with them to develop innovative ways of building relations with other women and to help them to discover the signs of radicalisation. Over time, women's organisations could support the establishment of networks of trusted individuals who the community can go to air concerns, share experiences and, when necessary, to raise awareness with the authorities through individuals appreciative of the need for preventative efforts. Building such trust requires time, however.

### **Factors to Radicalisation and Recruitment**

The third example is a non-field-based review and analysis of the situation in South-Central Somalia. The study was intended as preparatory work for a later field study, which is yet to be undertaken. The assumption underpinning the study is that recruitment to Al-Shabaab in south central Somalia is changing.

The changing political, military and financial circumstances have seen the death of commander Godane and the consequent restructuring of the group's internal management and organisational hierarchy under Ahmed Umar, as well as weakened territorial control, particularly with the loss of Barrowe as a key access point to the sea.

The study was led by the RUSI team in Nairobi and used a USAID-inspired framework to identify push and pull factors; push factors comprising socioeconomic factors that make individuals look for alternatives, and pull factors being those that attract people to the violent group (Table 2).

The study also highlighted the need for an understanding of how varied recruitment processes can be in Somalia. Many fighters are recruited on a clan basis, for political and protection reasons; from a CVE perspective this is important, because radicalisation is believed to have very little importance in such recruitment processes.

**TABLE 2:** Push and Pull Factors in Somalia

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Unemployment and poverty	Access to material resources
Clan marginalisation	Access to weaponry and protection
Social and political marginalisation	A sense of belonging
Poor (or no) governance	Order and strong governance
AMISOM* human-rights violations and violence	Revenge-seeking
Endemic corruption and impunity of certain groups	Self-esteem/personal empowerment (being a hero for defending one's country and religion)
Youth frustrations	Religious justification (victory or paradise)

\*African Union Mission in Somalia

A less-collective form of recruitment is more interesting from a radicalisation perspective as, in this case, recruitment constitutes an individual choice often made as part of a desire to challenge the clan system and elders; radicalisation and a desire to contribute to international jihad is at the heart of such recruitment. Finally, there may be a trend of forced recruitment, which again must be considered separately, and as such addressed uniquely. Needless to say, further field-based research is required to more comprehensively understand the three recruitment dynamics described, in order to be able to inform programming.

In summary, the desk study raises new questions, including:

- Will the Al-Shabaab narrative change?
- Will the organisation remain unified (or break into factions)?
- How will the new leader be positioned?
- Will the organisation become less ideologically driven and more locally focused, or vice versa?
- Will a link to the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS) be established? Might hardliners push for new alliances?

These and many more questions will only be answered with time, but in a preliminary consideration it is likely that perceptions of Al-Shabaab are changing. They are no longer perceived to be “winners” and their message might be harder to sell. They may start engaging to a greater extent in criminal activity for funding purposes, which is likely to reduce public support. And, if they seek new funding streams, new donors might force them to adapt their ideology to allow this. There is also a risk of more coercive recruitment and the group’s internal management may be in flux.

Finally, the study highlights the fact that despite these changes, Al-Shabaab are still in significant control in rural areas, and maintain control of infrastructure and roads. They continue to impose taxation to maintain their financial support. They are in close collaboration with actors who affect markets by controlling the supply chain. The underlying clan conflicts that Al-Shabaab is utilising to their advantage remain unresolved.

From a programming perspective, this desk research simply presents the recommendation that there is a need to understand the situation better before tailoring CVE activities in this area, and



also that working in a context where armed conflict is on-going may not be suitable for this type of primarily preventative activity – in South Central, in the shorter term, it may be necessary to work more actively with defectors, through reintegration, psychosocial support and work with law enforcement.

Regionally, the described development poses new challenges in terms of returning fighters. In particular, Kenya has seen an influx of returning fighters, similarly there have been defectors within Somalia. The legal framework and reintegration options are still being developed, and responsibilities assigned, in both Kenya and Somalia.

Simultaneously, particularly in Kenya, individual recruitment to local radical cells and associated violent groups is on the increase, with these individuals posing a less predictable threat than those recruited to Al-Shabaab directly.

## Research Challenges

CVE is a new field with poorly developed defini-

tions and wide-ranging political connotations. It is a very sensitive topic to research, which is hard to translate into Kiswahili and Somali. Such research may pose risks to:

- Researchers collecting data in places where it is a challenge to put in place good support structures;
- The quality of information;
- Entities publicising the information.

Local researchers might be more willing to take risks in order to deliver the research and may go further in encouraging interviewees to answer, which can put all actors under pressure. There is significant pressure to produce findings and recommendations that are actionable within concrete initiatives, so that donors, governments and implementing actors can be seen to be doing something about the problem. Finally, there is a need for an in-depth understanding of local politics and circumstances to enable researchers and institutions to understand subtleties in the findings and be able to interpret and communicate them.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations for other Researchers

STRIVE as a research-based pilot is fortunate to be able to undertake research as activities are implemented. This allows for real-time learning and for constant improvements to understanding and the testing of ideas. Some examples include data collection around training activities to help gauge understanding and approaches to the process of capacity-building; panel focus groups of listeners to radio programmes to assist in understanding whether messaging is coming across and whether it is relevant; interviews with mentees and peers to help the team to understand the situation in a particular location and whether STRIVE is reaching those at risk for radicalisation in the mentorship programme.

The paper concludes with a number of recommendations:

- CVE programming should integrate real-time research and data collection into activities to be responsive to constantly changing circumstances and to continue learning.
- Working with researchers with local connections and language/dialect is necessary to improve access and trust. This simultaneously requires more management.
- It takes time to build trust to talk about issues related to violence and to plan well, as follow-up interviews may be needed.

- It is important never to talk directly about “terrorism” or “violent extremism” if it is not brought up by the interviewee – instead, focusing on local issues and concerns to gauge the issue.
- Information is power and there is a war going on – it must be expected that people will contest findings.
- Delivery of analysis should be managed and considered as a part of the objective of influencing debate.
- Recommendations should be made which are specific to each actor, in light of their different roles (government, civil society, media, international actors, etc.).

## Assessing Violent Extremism: The case of Burkina Faso

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**KEYWORDS:** *violent extremism; countering violent extremism; Burkina Faso; resilience*

The terms “violent extremism” (VE) and “countering violent extremism” (CVE) are recent additions to the lexicon of counterterrorism. The importance of extremist ideas in processes of terrorist recruitment and radicalization has been known for some time. But it is only in the last decade that a more sustained focus on the ideational aspects of terrorism has emerged and that CVE as a field of policy and practice has become more coherent.

As the field has grown, we can observe variation in the way states “do” CVE, both in terms of substance and process. Regarding the latter, if we take an aggregate-level view, we can discern an ideal type “CVE policy cycle,” similar to those in other areas of public policy. That is, states have tended to respond to VE through a four-stage process of: assessment; policy development; implementation and; evaluation. At present, some stages of this policy cycle are better developed than others. For example, policy development and implementation have advanced quickly at the national level and have been facilitated by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) CVE Working Group which has elaborated “good practices” in several areas within the CVE domain.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, efforts to evaluate CVE measures have been more modest to date (Dawson, Edwards and Jeffray, 2014; Chowdhury Fink, Romaniuk and Barakat, 2013; Romaniuk and Chowdhury Fink, 2012).

The “CVE policy cycle” is described in depth elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on the “assessment” phase and describes a study of violent extremism in Burkina Faso that I recently coauthored with Augustin Loada (Loada and Romaniuk, 2014), who was then Executive Director of the Centre for Democratic Governance in Ouagadougou ([www.cgd-igd.org](http://www.cgd-igd.org)). The chapter reflects upon the process and findings of our assessment of VE in Burkina Faso, which is vulnerable to VE although the threat is not imminent.

### Violent Extremism and Burkina Faso: Theory and method

Burkina Faso is perhaps far from an obvious choice in undertaking an assessment of VE. The problem of VE is more urgent in neighboring Mali, where regional extremist groups were only pushed back after military intervention by France in 2013, fol-

lowed by ECOWAS and United Nations deployments. Similarly, extremism in nearby northeastern Nigeria is capturing more headlines as Boko Haram continues its insurgent campaign in brutal fashion, giving rise to concerns that violence may

\* While this chapter draws extensively upon Loada and Romaniuk (2014), I remain solely responsible for its contents.

1 These are available on the Working Group’s website: <https://www.thegctf.org/web/guest/countering-violent-extremism>.

2 See Peter Romaniuk, *Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism* (Global Center on Cooperative Security, forthcoming).

spread to Cameroon and Chad. Further, the risks of instability and identity-based conflict may seem higher in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire than in Burkina Faso.

Why study VE in Burkina Faso? Pragmatically, our case selection was donor-driven,<sup>3</sup> as is much research (both on and off the public record) that has informed the CVE debate to date. But there are sound methodological and policy reasons to pursue VE assessments in countries that do not have a well-known VE problem and in Burkina Faso in particular. For example, compared to its neighbors and other regional states, the relative absence of VE in Burkina Faso represents an outcome of particular interest. In this way, this case can yield insights into the factors that suppress or otherwise mitigate against VE. Thus, to study Burkina Faso is to “select on the dependent variable,” an approach social scientists generally avoid. Still, this approach may be useful in the early stages of a research program (to understand the “potential causal paths and variables leading to the dependent variable of interest”), where cross-case comparisons will follow (George and Bennett, 2005, p.23).

There are also policy-relevant reasons to study VE in Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso contributes both military and police personnel to the UN Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and has suffered several fatalities as a result of those deployments. Prior to MINUSMA, Burkina Faso cooperated with France when it launched its initial intervention in Mali (Operation Serval) in 2013. Similarly, Burkina Faso is a participant in US-led counterterrorism initiatives in the region under the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Some CVE-related programming has already been advanced in Burkina Faso under the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) “PDEV II” (Peace through Development) initiative. We also found that Burkinabe authorities have been alert to the potential spillover effects of regional ex-

tremism and have trained and redeployed troops domestically for this purpose, with donor support. Short of a formal counterterrorism or CVE strategy, the Burkinabe authorities have advanced a series of measures that might fall under the definition of “CVE.” In light of these developments, a systematic study of VE in Burkina Faso is timely.

We framed our assessment around three straightforward research questions: what is the extent of VE in Burkina Faso?; what are the origins of VE in Burkina Faso or its likely sources? and; what are the sources of resilience against VE in Burkina Faso? These were designed to establish a baseline regarding the nature, extent and causes of VE in the country which could then be leveraged prospectively, to provide empirically-based insights into VE in Burkina Faso in the short and medium term. We felt it important to address the concept of resilience specifically, to capture the dynamics that make Burkina Faso unique among regional states and to inform future efforts to advance CVE measures, which should consider indigenous mechanisms for conflict prevention. In order to answer these questions we utilized the “drivers of VE” approach that was initially developed for USAID (Denoeux with Carter, 2009a, 2009b). As noted above, this approach alerts analysts to the broad range of factors – socioeconomic, political and cultural – that may play a role in processes of radicalization.

In terms of research methods, there are many forms of data, and many possible ways to gather it, that may be utilized in assessing VE. In our case, we gathered original data through interviews and focus groups in five locations across the country – Ouagadougou, Dori, Ouahigouya, Bobo-Dioulasso and Fada N’Gourma. In Dori, we visited a nearby refugee camp hosting Tuaregs displaced by the fighting in Mali. Through our fieldwork we were able to engage more than 130 people in in-depth discussions about VE and resilience in Burkina Faso. In selecting our interview subjects, we adopted a basic snowballing approach and also

3 Funding for our assessment was generously provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

leveraged existing networks. From my perspective, working with a local research partner was critical, in terms of identifying and gaining access to research subjects and performing field work, as well as in understanding the data in its local context. Our sample of interviewees reflected a general cross-section of Burkinabe society and included government officials, civil society and religious leaders, and students and other civilians. We also met with members of the diplomatic community in Ouagadougou. In order to facilitate discussion, we used several open-ended interview questions and undertook the interviews on a not-for-attribution basis. We did not record interviews but relied on extensive notes and post-interview discussions among the research team. Although we were not able to conduct survey research, we met with NGOs that undertake such work. Further, we utilized secondary sources for descriptive content and to triangulate facts and claims gathered through our primary data collection. We drew upon Afrobarometer data (my coauthor is the National Partner for Burkina Faso) as well as several recent NGO reports, some of which utilized survey research (for example, Bertrand, Sindayigaya and Deceukelier, 2013). Overall, we had a large pool of data to draw on.

An important note here is that our desk and field research was undertaken between November 2013 and April 2014, prior to the most recent political developments in Burkina Faso. In October 2014, President Blaise Compaoré, who had ruled the country as military dictator and civilian president for a total of 27 years, introduced a bill to modify constitutional limits on presidential tenure and allow him to run again at the end of his term in 2015. This sparked massive protests in Ouagadougou and across the country. Although the bill was withdrawn, the protests persisted. Compaoré subsequently resigned on 31 October and fled to Côte d'Ivoire. At that time, too, the constitution was suspended. With the Presidential Guard formally in control, two weeks of meetings among political opposition parties, members of civil society organizations, and religious and traditional

leaders, as well as the defense and security forces, yielded a charter for political transition. Under that charter, an interim administration – with Lt. Col. Zida from the Presidential Guard as Prime Minister – has been put in place with elections to be held in November 2015. At the time of drafting this chapter my coauthor on the assessment, Augustin Loada, was serving in the interim cabinet as Minister for Public Service, Labor and Social Security.

In policy terms, these developments give cause for optimism about the prospects for democratic transition in Burkina Faso. Later, I discuss whether and how such a transition might impact levels of VE. For present purposes, these occurrences underscore that assessments reflect a snapshot based on the available evidence. In this regard, our assessment provides a baseline against which any future variation in levels of VE can be measured. For example, the impact of political transition on levels of VE is an open question, on which this case should shed some light.

### **Burkina Faso: Vulnerable to VE but no imminent threat**

The principal finding of our assessment is that Burkina Faso is vulnerable to VE but that the threat is not imminent. That is, structural conditions in Burkina Faso are such that there is a prevalence of “push factors,” which increase the risk of VE. However, we found a relative absence of “pull factors,” with the result that a broadly stated vulnerability has not translated into specific threats. At the same time, we identified numerous sources of resilience in Burkina Faso, deriving from both the state and from civil society. I address these points in turn.

**Push factors:** The protests that broke out across Burkina Faso in October 2014 were an apt illustration of deeply held grievances among the Burkinabe populace. While many observers – and, no doubt, many of those in the streets – were perhaps surprised that the protests prompted Compaoré’s

sudden resignation and departure, few doubted the breadth and depth of popular disaffection with his rule. Grievances arising from the political and economic situation in Burkina Faso had been documented in the past (for example, International Crisis Group, 2013) and had yielded occasional large-scale protests in the preceding years. The issue of presidential term limits was a frequent topic of discussion over the course of our research. With 2015 looming (when Compaoré's final term would end), there was a clear sense that something would happen, either to amend or override the constitution and entrench "system Compaoré," or to somehow precipitate the end of the Compaoré era. Towards the end of 2013 and at the beginning of 2014, political uncertainty was palpable.

The specific grievances that led to this situation were abundantly apparent to us. In terms of political drivers, our interviewees gave particular emphasis to high levels of corruption in Burkina Faso and the corresponding lack of official accountability, giving rise to a sense of impunity for well-connected elites. A debate about "incivisme" (incivility) had arisen in Burkina Faso as a response to an increase in ad hoc incidents of unrest and low-level rioting triggered by relatively minor events, such as traffic accidents. For many of our interviewees, this was indicative of a decline in the regulatory capacity of the state as well as changing social norms about expressing disaffection in public. At their core, political grievances derived from the dominance of the political system by the same ruling elites for almost three decades. To put this in perspective, consider that almost half of Burkina Faso's population of more than 18 million people is under the age of 14; as a result, a majority of Burkinabes have known no other government than that led by Compaoré.

The widening gap between Burkinabes' expectations and the persistently poor quality of governance is of course made worse by socioeconomic conditions. Burkina Faso is a poor, unequal country with a rapidly growing population, about 90 percent of whom engage in subsistence agricul-

ture, while almost half live below the poverty line. Thanks to the expansion of the mining sector, Burkina Faso regularly records an annual rate of GDP growth around 1.6 percent (Luning, 2008; Koussoubé at al., 2014). But this is "growth without [a] trickle down effect," and wealth remains concentrated among those at the top (Koussoubé at al., 2014). All other socioeconomic indicators (including unemployment, literacy, fertility, infant and maternal health, etc.) make clear why Burkina Faso is near the very bottom of the Human Development Index – 183rd out of the 186 countries ranked in 2013 (United Nations Development Program, 2013).

In sum, macro-level data attests to the kinds of exclusion and marginality, relative deprivation and unmet economic needs that have been identified as possible drivers of VE. Our interviewees also identified socioeconomic tensions. For example, the governance of land resources has been contentious in both urban and rural settings. Regarding the former, Ouagadougou has expanded quickly in recent years. This has sometimes occurred informally, with local-level officials allegedly engaging in clientelism and self-enrichment. Outside of the city, there is competition for land use between farmers and herders, which is overlaid with a cleavage between ethnic groups. In areas surrounding mining developments, we heard a range of community-level grievances pertaining to access to food, water and housing, the state of the environment, and opportunities for education, training and employment. "Artisanal" (informal) mining had provided an income for many locals, especially women, and that opportunity has often been lost. Our interviewees noted several examples of protests occurring among communities adjacent to mines.

Education is a further point of socioeconomic contention, with concerns raised about the quality of teaching, poor infrastructure and the adequacy of curricula in relation to the job market. The Burkinabe education system tends to reproduce the existing social order and the poor often prefer

informal schools (including Koranic schools) over the public system, or they withdraw their children altogether. We heard that the higher education system is in a state of malaise. Students face a range of barriers in completing their degrees, including a shortage of teachers, poverty, inadequate social services, strikes and overlapping academic years. Those that do graduate find scarce employment opportunities. The gap between students' expectations and the harsh reality of their situation has again led to protests.

Regarding potential cultural drivers of VE, Burkina Faso is similar to its neighbors in that it is both multiethnic and multi religious (some 60 percent of the population is Muslim). However, Burkina Faso is unique in that identity-based conflict is less prevalent than elsewhere, although some such tensions persist. Some of our interviewees perceived breaches in the policy of official secularism in small ways (such as the display of Christmas trees) and large (e.g. that lawmakers tend to reproduce Christian values, or that identity matters in deciding upon official appointments). Education came up again in this context as several interviewees noted that Koranic schools are unregulated and that their curricula is not harmonized with those in the public system. As a consequence, graduates of Koranic schools face particular difficulties in the job market and sometimes have few options but to continue their studies abroad, often in the Gulf states.

Government responses to intercommunal tension are perceived to be tepid. Officially sanctioned interreligious dialogues are seen as elitist and lack credibility. The government has been hesitant to intercede in disputes where the rights of different groups clash. Where firebrand preachers have come to light, the failure to respond has given rise to claims of appeasement. There is a gap in that no study or database on the public record compiles basic information on churches, mosques and other places of worship. This would be a first step in improving the ability of the state to manage intercommunal relations towards tolerance and cohesion.

Overall, we discerned a prevalence of structural conditions – push factors – that increase the vulnerability of Burkina Faso to VE. At the same time, writing prior to the October 2014 protests and the subsequent commencement of the period of political transition, we emphasized that the gravest threat to stability in Burkina Faso came not from VE but from uncertainty surrounding the political situation in the country. Now that a transitional administration is in place, and with a view to the November 2015 elections, that concern can be seen in a different light. Indeed, the largely peaceful nature of the transition so far seems to have generated a broad sense of goodwill, which is a necessary first step in addressing the structural-level grievances described here. Still, all future governments in Burkina Faso will face the steep challenge of acting to improve living conditions for the populace: a secondary benefit of this will be to reduce vulnerability to VE.

**Pull factors:** Despite the prevalence of push factors in Burkina Faso, we found no imminent threat of VE. Push factors alone do not produce VE but rather combine with factors at the group and individual level to yield a VE outcome. In assessing these factors, we deduced a typology of pathways through which VE might enter or emerge in Burkina Faso: as a spillover effect from regional extremism; as a result of radicalization among groups and individuals domestically and; through the influence of foreign extremists (i.e. from outside the region). Here, I elaborate our findings with regard to these three pathways.

Our interviewees expressed concern about the uptick in regional extremism and the likelihood that Burkina Faso would be affected. The deployment of Burkinabe forces as part of MINUSMA, and President Compaoré's role at the time as a mediator among the combatants in Mali (which included hosting leaders of the Tuareg armed group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), were seen by some as increasing Burkina Faso's vulnerability. Similarly, some interviewees expressed concern that Burkina Faso's decision to

host refugees from the fighting in Mali might increase the likelihood of extremist infiltration.

Despite these concerns, we found only scant evidence that VE has crossed the border from Mali or elsewhere. We read some reports and heard anecdotes about individual Burkinabes attempting to raise funds and acquire weapons for Boko Haram in Nigeria. We similarly heard that French forces apprehended several Burkinabes in Mali. Some interviewees in Ouahigouya related an account of a local man that left to fight with MUJAO. He was apparently drawn in through organized recruiters that offered a cash incentive (CFA 300,000, about USD 560) for his participation. He completed his tour, returned home and used the money to open a small business, we were told. At no stage was it suggested that he was ideologically motivated. Interestingly, this method of recruitment – and the same sum of money – was known among the Tuareg refugees we spoke with, who noted that MUJAO had taken a similar approach in Mali. We also heard that following the uptick in violence in Mali, some well-resourced Tuaregs began to appear in border towns and gained attention locally for their extremely conservative religious views. In Dori, local religious leaders drew upon their networks to engage the newcomers and we found no evidence that their presence prompted locals to radicalize.

We found no direct evidence of small group- or self-radicalization initiated within Burkina Faso. Our interviewees emphasized the fundamentally tolerant nature of intercommunal relations, pointing out that intrafaith tension among Muslims is more likely than interfaith tension between Muslims and others. At the same time, many noted a trend towards increasingly conservative religious practices. This is said to pertain among believers of all faiths but is most visible among young Muslim men, who grow beards and wear their trousers short. Among some interviewees, this trend correlates with the growing debate on “incivisme.” We found a few examples of young Muslims mobilizing as Muslims and participating in protests. But

these examples clearly fall far short of radicalization.

Regarding foreign extremists, we found some evidence that people from outside the region with very conservative views had been present in some of the towns we visited. The government is clearly alert to the possibility that radical (Muslim) preachers may attempt to visit from abroad and visa controls have been instituted to prevent this. But we found no evidence of Burkinabes radicalizing after having contact with any such foreign preacher. Similarly, we found no examples of Burkinabes traveling to fight in extremist conflicts outside of the region, such as Iraq and Syria.

**Sources of resilience:** The absence of pull factors over the course of our research led us to conclude that VE is not an imminent threat in Burkina Faso. In a country experiencing political transition and facing significant development challenges, vulnerability to VE should be seen in context. But it should not drop off the agenda. Rather, as Burkina Faso makes advances towards democratization and development, maintaining low levels of VE will be critical. To this end, we identified multiple sources of resilience, deriving both from the state and from civil society.

In our assessment, the Burkinabe state is in need of broad and deep reform. Nonetheless, we suggest that the state also furnishes several sources of resilience. For all of their shortcomings, national institutions over the period of Compaoré’s rule did not have the effect of precipitating sustained identity-based conflict. To the contrary, there was some evidence that state mechanisms for dialogue and conflict resolution had some integrative effects, even if they also attracted skepticism. The government effectively exercises territorial control and has advanced a series of counterterrorism and CVE-related measures. The press in Burkina Faso is generally adheres to standards of social responsibility. While this involves self-censorship, hate speech and incitements to violence – which have been so destructive elsewhere – are largely



absent. Over time, the state has had some success in cultivating a sense of Burkinabe national identity that has resonance among the populace. Annual events celebrate Burkinabe diversity amid national unity. Burkina Faso compares favorably to its neighbors in this regard and the idea of nationhood provides some basis for preserving tolerance and social cohesion.

Hopefully, the political transition that is currently under way, and the forthcoming elections in November 2015, will build upon these sources of state-based resilience. If that occurs, they will complement sources resilience in civil society. Our interviews made clear that Burkinabes perceive themselves to be tolerant and place a high value on social cohesion – indeed, many clearly view this as an integral part of Burkinabe identity. Interviewees pointed out that many families are ethnically and religiously mixed and that this is a bulwark against intercommunal tension. Informal social institutions that have broken down in neighboring countries – such as “joking relationships” (*la parentée à plaisanterie*), wherein members of different groups may exchange insults in jest – persist in Burkina Faso. Civil society, religious and traditional leaders also espouse tolerance as a general rule and act in the interests of social cohesion. We found examples of networks among faith leaders

to identify and counsel those with extremely conservative views. We also found examples of NGOs in the development field undertaking projects with a methodology so as to bring together members of different communities, and youths in particular. We gained the impression that there are both precedents and partners in civil society that can be drawn upon in nurturing resilience and building peace.

In concluding our assessment, we recommended that stakeholders find ways to preserve and enhance sources of resilience. We suggested that the government articulate a Burkinabe concept of *laïcité* while rededicating itself to standards of good governance and anti-corruption measures. Among civil society groups, horizontal networks should be supported to ensure that interreligious dialogues resonate at the local level. Burkina Faso’s international partners should consider vulnerability to VE in determining geographic priorities and methodologies for delivering aid and other assistance. While the question of the link between security and development has attracted a lot of attention in policy circles, Burkina Faso is a case where these goals should be integrated: just as underdevelopment increases vulnerability to VE, the spread of VE would have negative effects for development.

## Conclusion

CVE has emerged recently and quickly. This trajectory will be maintained for a good while yet, rendering the CVE policy cycle more visible. This chapter is an initial attempt to accumulate knowledge about the first step in that cycle, the assessment phase.

Our assessment of VE in Burkina Faso found that there is vulnerability but no imminent threat – a prevalence of push factors but a relative absence of pull factors. The ongoing political developments in the country necessarily affect our findings. Still, I would argue that our recommendations, such as those described above, maintain relevance for the transitional administration and the post-November 2015 government, as well as for civil society and Burkina Faso’s international partners. In concluding, it is apt to ask how the transition might affect levels of VE.

An initial point is that the protests – which included some rioting, looting and the use of force to control crowds – are an indication of instability and, perhaps, heightened vulnerability. In reporting on these

events, and the period of uncertainty before transitional charter was agreed, US and other media outlets frequently drew attention to this vulnerability by noting that Burkina Faso is an important ally in regional counterterrorism efforts. On the flip side, the largely peaceful nature of the transition, and the fact that the charter was a negotiated settlement among diverse stakeholders, underscores the vitality of the sources of resistance described above. In this way, a peaceful transition ameliorates some of the push factors we identified, reducing vulnerability to VE. Indeed, it is a significant achievement that the transition has proceeded without an apparent rise in identity-based conflict. To maintain this record, it is useful to recall the many ways in which CVE overlaps with established fields of practice, such as peacebuilding and conflict resolution. To fulfil the promise of Burkina Faso's transition will require such broad expertise and, critically, the ongoing engagement and commitment of the international community. Despite their location in one of the world's most difficult regions, Burkinabes may be on the verge of replacing dictatorship with democracy. This would be a landmark occurrence and a powerful statement against extremism.

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## Terrorism/Crime Nexus in Central Asia: Implications for countering violent extremism and terrorism

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**KEYWORDS:** *terrorism-crime nexus, organized violence, Central Asia*

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia<sup>1</sup> has struggled with a host of socio-economic and political challenges. Bad governance, weak law-enforcement, corruption, unsound social policies, and an uneven distribution of wealth are among the multitude of problems that have contributed to and have been affected by the rise of violence in the region. This violence has taken many forms, of which religiously driven terrorism and insurgency has received considerable attention. The risks associated with Islamist radicalization of Central Asian societies are a recurring theme of political and academic discourses in Central Asia and beyond. While there is no consensus on the extent of radicalization and the magnitude of threat that it poses to security of Central Asian nations, the prevailing opinion is that religious fundamentalism has made a forceful comeback in the post-Soviet Central Asia, and that the threat of violent extremism is both widespread and growing across the region.<sup>2</sup>

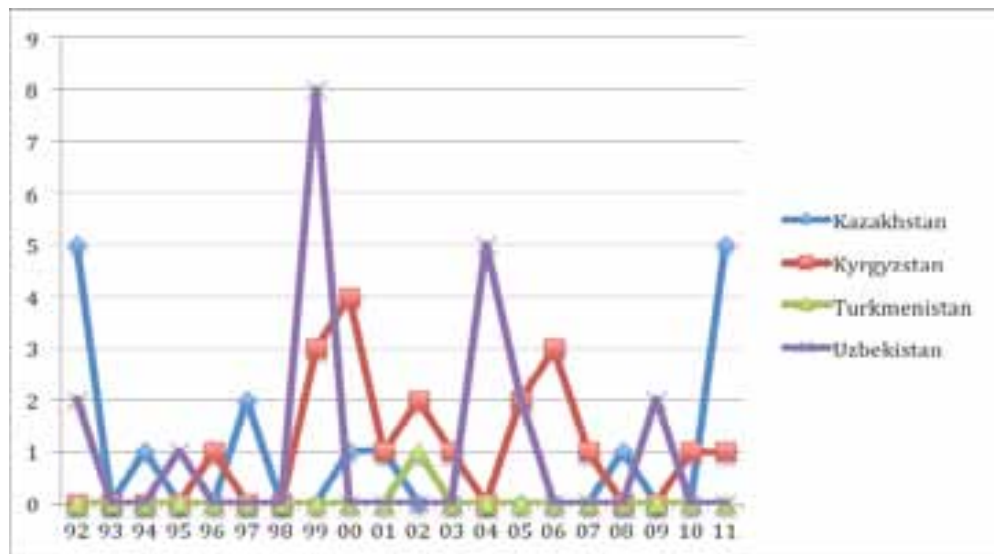
The argument advanced in this research note is more nuanced. The nature of “terrorist” violence that has plagued parts of Central Asia is more complex than previously described. Not every incident of violence described as “terrorist” attacks by mass media and local governments has been driven by religious extremist motivations, while radicalization of organizations that pursue political goals is not limited to Islamist groups. A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between different forms of organized violence must be attained if effective policies aimed at preventing and combating violent extremism are to be developed and implemented in Central Asia.

To demonstrate the complex nature of violence subsumed under the rubric of religious extremism and terrorism, this paper points out the phenomenon of convergence of terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia. The neighbors of Afghanistan, Central Asian republics have been increasingly used as a transit territory for Afghan opioids bound for Russia and Western Europe (Burnashev, 2007). By some estimates, 25-30% of drugs produced in Afghanistan (primarily heroin) are transported through the Northern route, although known as the Silk Route (Burnashev, 2007; Madi, 2004; UNODC, 2012). The terrorism/crime nexus has given rise to violent attacks where the identity of perpetrators (criminal, insurgent, or criminal-insurgent) and motivations for the use of force (political, profit-related, or both) are fused or uncertain. The concept of the terrorism/crime nexus and evidence that supports the coexistence and collaboration of Islamist organizations with organized criminal groups highlight the fact that Islamist radicalization,

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1 For the purpose of this research note, Central Asia refers to the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

2 It is important to note that recent studies of Islam in Central Asia have criticized these assessments (see, for example, Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014). Central Asian states are bastions of moderate and traditional Islam, and the rise of radical and militant forms of Islam have been exaggerated by both the governments and the Islamists.

**FIGURE 1:** Terrorist Attacks in Central Asia

**Source:** A National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database (2012)*. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

**Note:** Tajikistan is excluded from the figure due to the larger number of terrorist accidents registered during the Civil War period skewing the presentation of results. In 1994-95, Tajikistan had over 30 terrorist incidences, and in 1997- 42.

terrorism, and drug-related crimes share socio-economic and political root causes. Therefore, for counterterrorism, counter-extremism, and anti-drug policies to be successful they must be viewed as parts of a broader comprehensive framework of preventive measures and responses to organized violence and crime.

### Deciphering the Nature of Organized Violence in Central Asia

The problem of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia has been associated with activities of several Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Jund al-Khilafah (JaK) (Soldiers of the Caliphate), Hizb ut-Tahrir, Akramiya, Hizb an-Nusra, and Tablighi Jamaat, among others. While some of these groups (IMU/IJU, ETIM, and JaK) have a record of violence and insurgent operations inside and outside the region, others (Hizb ut-Tahrir, Akramiya, and Hizb an-Nusra) officially eschew violent means for accomplishing their goals. The IMU and Akramiya are the two organizations that are native to the region, while all other radical groups have foreign origin. Tajikistan recently saw the emergence of another

foreign radical group, *Jamoati Ansorulloh*. With links to graduates from Pakistani madrasas, the new organization has called for jihad against the Tajik government of President Rahmon.

According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) *Global Terrorism Database (2012)*, a total of 85 terrorist incidents took place in Central Asian republics since 1998 to the present (see Figure 1). The majority of those attacks (29.4%) targeted government, 20% were aimed at police, 14% - private citizens and property, 8.2% - diplomatic representatives of foreign governments, and 5.1% - business. Islamists claimed responsibility in less than 10% of terrorist incidents (IMU was identified as a perpetrator of violence in 3.5%

cases; IJU – 5.9%; the Soldiers of the Caliphate – 2.4%; and ETIM – 1.2%). In 71.8% of cases, the perpetrator of violence was unknown. This, in turn, raises a question about the perpetrator's identity.

Upon a closer examination, the majority of registered terrorist attacks took place in the areas with frequent drug seizures (UNODC, 2014). For example, the capital cities of Central Asian states have experienced high volume of trafficking in drugs, and they have also borne the brunt of terrorist violence. Other locations with high drug trafficking and terrorism include Osh city and province, including the Kara-suu valley in Kyrgyzstan, the Gorno-Badakhshan province with its capital Khorogh and Sughd province with capital Khujand in Tajikistan, and the Fergana valley, Samarkand, and Namangan in Uzbekistan.

This overlap of terrorism and drug trafficking suggests several possibilities for terrorist/criminal convergence in the region: (1) terrorist and drug trafficking groups operate within the same areas, utilize similar routes for the movement of people and transportation of illicit goods, and rely on the same networks of corrupt state and local agencies, while maintaining their strategic independence; (2) terrorist groups resort to drug trafficking for financing their activities in pursuit of political goals; or (3) criminal organizations turn to anti-government violence for advancing their economic aims. While the precise nature of the terrorism/drug trafficking nexus is difficult to ascertain, partly because Central Asian governments tend to portray all violent attacks on the government or military posts as activities of jihadists, the available evidence is indicative of the presence of all forms of convergence between drug trafficking and terrorism (Omelicheva, 2014).

It is well established, for example, that the IMU was a leading trafficker of opiates from Afghanistan, especially under the leadership of Namangani (Madi, 2004; Makarenko, 2002). The IMU's incursions in Kyrgyzstan in 1999, which

have been portrayed as an attempt of a radical Islamist movement's intrusion into Uzbekistan for overthrowing the secular government of President Karimov, pursued a different purpose, namely, securing drug trafficking route from Afghanistan. The stockpiles of opium and heroin had built up in the Afghan territory following one of the largest harvests of opium and waited to be transported to Russia and Western Europe (Madi, 2004; Makarenko, 2002). It remains likely that the remnants of the IMU fighting in the Taliban insurgency and its splinter groups (e.g., IJU) continue engaging in drug trafficking to secure funding required for accomplishing distinctly political objectives in the absence of other financial and operational support. It comes to no surprise that official reports of the Central Asian governments announcing detentions, liquidations, or trials of Islamic militants or drug traffickers often contain charges for both kinds of crime. Tajikistan's officials, for example, often report arresting traffickers who turn out to be the IMU members. In an infamous case of the escape of 25 high-profile prisoners from a detention center in Dushanbe in 2010, all convicts had been sentenced on charges related to both terrorism and drug trafficking. Some of the escapees reportedly had ties with the IMU.

A spike of violence in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region in 2012, which the Tajik government has portrayed as the jihadist resurgence, further exemplifies the complex nexus of Islamist violence and crime. Gorno-Badakhshan's security chief – Abdullo Nazarov – was killed in July 2012. His deputy – Tolib Ayombekov – was charged with the slaying. The Tajik government poured hundreds of troops into the region during a week-long operation against the alleged "militants." Although, Mr. Ayombekov was not captured, at least 22 locals and many soldiers were killed. While the apprehension of Mr. Ayombekov was the declared purpose of the dispatch of security forces in the region, it is also possible that the government used Mr. Nazarov's death as a pretext for unseating the local warlords loyal to the slayed security chief. It is also telling that Mr. Ayombekov and

his men fought for the Pamiris during the Tajik Civil War and continue providing local patronage. They have also been implicated in the smuggling of tobacco, gems, narcotics, and possibly humans (Trilling, 2014). In the wake of the military operation, the Tajik government announced that it captured 40 militants, including eight Afghans, implying that the Afghan Taliban was involved in the fighting. However, it is very unlikely that the predominantly Sunni Taliban would have much in common with the Pamiri ethnic groups that adhere to Shia Islam. If there were any links, those would have to do with drug trafficking and other illicit trade (Owen, 2012; Trilling, 2014).

The convergence of violent religious extremism and drug trafficking-related violence is not surprising as both Islamic radicalization and drug-related crimes are driven by similar factors. All forms of organized violence in Central Asia take place in ungoverned or difficult-to-govern areas providing ample opportunities for illicit activities, violence, and crime (Patrick, 2006). The challenges to governing these territories may be linked to their geographic/topographic characteristics (e.g., long common borders between Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, which are difficult to police effectively due to the mountainous topography of the area). In Tajikistan, fighting between Tajik security forces and armed groups of drug dealers and/or insurgents often occur on the banks and islands of the Panj river that forms the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The territorial rights of some islands in the Panj river and further west in the Amu Darya are disputed because both rivers often change their courses. The challenges to governance could also stem from the general weaknesses of the central government, which are common in conflict and post-conflict zones as well as states characterized by factionalized politics and sectarian divisions.

Central Asian enclaves, most of which are located in the Ferghana valley, exemplify territories with weak central rule. The power vacuum, lack of allegiance to and remoteness from the central

authorities, and lawlessness make these areas perfect for transit of insurgents and narcotics. Absent strong governance, economic opportunities, and the rule of law, these areas provide conditions conducive not only for the rise of “new crime” and “new terrorism,” but also for convergence between international terrorist organizations and transnational organized crime groups. Corruption and poverty that are inevitable corollaries of the weak rule make these phenomena more likely in the region.

Another major contributor to both Islamist radicalization and drug-related activities is the lack of opportunities for people, a problem common to weakly governed and “governable” parts of Central Asia. The poor economic situation creates scores of unemployed or underemployed individuals who must find additional ways to support themselves and their families. Such individuals often become willing collaborators for traffickers or the rank-and-file members of extremist groups. In Central Asia, organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir are able to convince recruits that they offer a more positive vision of the future. It is easier to draw this contrast when people face distressing situations such as poverty, discrimination, and a repressive and/or corrupt state. Radical organizations that provide simple answers to their problems become more appealing when state restrictions on media and religious expression discourage legitimate channels for citizens to communicate and express their dissent. Overly repressive state policies also build up resentment and sympathy for oppressed groups, making the radicalization of moderate Islamists more likely.

### **Implications of the Terrorism/Drug Trafficking Nexus for Policies aimed at Reducing Violent Extremism and Terrorism**

The analysis of patterns of terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia suggests that criminal and violent extremist activities can and do coincide, not least because they are driven by similar underlying conditions. It is important to note, however,



that the convergence of terrorism and organized crime is not replacing the individual insurgency campaigns driven by political motivations and activities of drug trafficking organizations driven by the considerations of profit. The existence of the terrorism/crime nexus calls for domestic and international policies that do not focus exclusively on insurgent/terrorist groups. However, the current counterterrorist and counter-extremist strategies employed by the Central Asian governments and approaches of foreign governments and international organizations do not integrate anti-drug measures into one comprehensive framework of policies aimed at preventing organized violence and responding to violent attacks.

The importance of integration of counterterrorist and anti-drug policies and interagency cooperation has been recognized at the international, regional, and national levels. On 19 December 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2195 (2014) urging international action to break links between terrorists and transnational organized crime. The United States and its partners have engaged in interagency cooperation to address the crime-terrorism nexus but until recently their primary focus has been on Latin America, Europe, and Afghanistan (not Central Asia). The U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and Southern Command have joint interagency units, which support the U.S. country team efforts and collaborate with a variety of international organizations and local governments on countering drug trafficking and other threats related to transnational organized crime. In Afghanistan, the Washington's counterterrorism efforts have concentrated on the support and training of the Afghan army and police and strengthening border controls. The US has also worked to prevent the reemergence of ungoverned territories that provide fruitful ground for mobilization and training of Islamists. Concurrently, the US has pursued an anti-drug policy by aiding Afghanistan's political and economic development with the goal of assisting poppy farmers to transition out of cultivation of illicit crops to "alternative development"

programs.

Ignoring the complex relationship of Islamist insurgency with drug trafficking and other forms of illicit trade in Central Asia is bound to severely undermine counterterrorist and counter-extremist efforts there. Criminal motives spread deep and wide throughout radical Islamist organizations, not least because drug trafficking and trade in illicit goods "feed" the militants and support their operations. Islamist groups without ideological leadership and with futile cause might turn to organized criminal activities under the bogus political banner. Organized criminal groups can also "teach" terrorist organizations new operational and organizational techniques and "share" knowledge of corrupt networks. Therefore, the danger posed by radical Islamist organizations is linked to not only their extremist motivations, but also their capabilities. If the connections with drug trafficking groups or involvement in criminal activities form the foundation of Islamist groups' capabilities, then the prevention and interdiction of these exchanges offer a unique, non-military opportunity to degrade the capacity of both terrorist and drug-trafficking organizations.

The scrutiny of violent attacks committed across Central Asia also suggests that domestic drug trafficking groups have developed in-house capabilities for armed engagements against government forces to secure their criminal operations. If, indeed, some of the violence attributed to Islamists is tied to local issues and drug trafficking problems and have few if any strong connections to international network of radical Islamists, than claims of the regional dimension of global jihad are exaggerated. Resources spent on the military operations aimed at combating violent international jihad are misplaced, and would have been better spent on intelligent socio-economic measures to improve peoples' lives, which constitutes necessary conditions for the achievement of social harmony throughout the region.

Educational efforts, in general, and religious ed-

ucation in particular, serve both ends: they can prevent Islamic radicalization and discourage youth from engaging with drugs. Instead of stifling religious freedoms and limiting discussion of the issues of faith, the Central Asian governments need to promote extensive religious and spiritual education, encourage dialogue within Islam, and support the expansion of critical coverage of religious issues by broadcasting organizations. The governments could partner with religious groups for developing and implementing measures aimed at the reduction of demand for and supply of drugs, thus undermining the economic basis of drug-related activities.

Equating all forms of organized violence with the rise of militant Islam militarizes anti-drug policies undermining their effectiveness. The illicit drug economy is a criminal-justice issue that should be addressed by an agency equipped to uncover and prosecute criminals. The use of military force stunts the advancement of effective democratic rule, as it presents military solutions as viable options for solving governance problems. The problems of poor governance, in turn, are an important factor in the rise of violent extremism. Therefore, the militarization of anti-drug efforts also contributes to Islamist militarization.

Furthermore, by treating all forms of organized violence as product of religious radicalization, Central Asian governments increase opportunities for the excessive use of force that has proved to be ineffective in curbing the spread of radical ideas or reducing the threat of terrorism. This limited approach has also legitimized government oppression of secular and religious opposition, thus ironically sowing the seeds for radicalization rather than destroying them.

To thwart the radical groups' attempts at gaining large-scale support among the moderate Muslims and criminal groups' allure of fast enrichment, the Central Asian governments have to turn to addressing the root causes of extremism, drug trafficking, and terrorism that can be found in the commonplace failings caused by corruption,

low standards of living, lack of opportunities, and authoritarianism. The counterterrorism, counter-extremism, and anti-drug policies should be based on a more systematic approach including political, informational, socio-economic, legal, and other responses to these security threats. Preventive and prophylactic measures of counteraction to these problems should be given a priority in the comprehensive program against organized violence.

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## Right-Wing Extremism in Canada

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**KEYWORDS:** *Canada; right-wing extremism; religious extremism; extremist groups*

There has been a steady level of right-wing extremist activity within Canada over the last 50 years, and anti-immigrant sentiment continues to crop up across the country. Canada has been home to a collection of right-wing extremists that have been surprisingly influential in global movements associated with white supremacy, Neo-Nazism, Identity Christianity, Creativity, and skinheads. Based on strong historical connections between Canadian extremists and those abroad, it is imprudent to presume Canada will not import right-wing violence from the U.S. and Europe.

### Framing Right-Wing Extremism

Canada's new Counter-Terrorism Strategy notes that violence from domestic terrorist groups including white supremacists, remains a reality in Canada, but relatively little contemporary research exists on Canadian right-wing extremism. Unclassified US Homeland Security and FBI reports have noted a national resurgence in right-wing extremism over the last decade, and its adherents have adopted concerns over immigration as a call to action following the economic downturn. Similar European groups have also emerged based on anti-Islamic sentiment. Given the rapid rate of immigration into Canada, it is plausible that right-wing extremist violence could flare up along the lines of similarly motivated attacks in the United States and Europe.

For the purposes of this essay, a working definition of *extremism* would be holding political, social, economic, or religious views that propose far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a threat to, the democratic order, while supporting criminal and non-criminal acts to achieve these aims. *Violent extremism* can be defined as seri-

ous threats, harm, murder, mayhem, and damage to property which are motivated and justified by extremist beliefs. The Canadian Criminal Code identifies a *terrorist* act to be committed "in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause" with the intention of intimidating the public "...with regard to its security, including its economic security, or compelling a person, a government or a domestic or an international organization to do or to refrain from doing any act." Terrorist activities can produce death and bodily harm, risks to the health and safety of the public, significant property damage, and interference or disruption of essential services, facilities or systems. Terrorism represents a specific form of violent extremism that is criminal and political.

Right-wing extremism, in particular, stems from a complex set of interrelated, and occasionally, conflicting beliefs systems, making it a difficult subject to frame. Right-wing extremism encompasses a large, loose, heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals espousing a wide range of griev-

ances and positions, including: anti-government/individual sovereignty; racism; fascism; white supremacy/white nationalism; anti-Semitism; nativism/anti-immigration; anti-globalization/anti-free trade; anti-abortion; homophobia; anti-taxation; and pro-militia/pro-gun rights stances (Simi, P. et al., 2013; Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Ross 1992; Gruenewald et al., 2013; DHS, 2009). Right-wing extremists may reach these stances from either religious interpretation or secular reasoning, and there is often conflict amongst various groups within this sphere. The similarities in targets and modus operandi suggest that these actors are best evaluated as a highly complex, yet interconnected community (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

There are several somewhat distinct types of right-wing extremists. One typology defines right-wing extremists thusly:

1. General White Supremacists (e.g., Aryan Brotherhood, Ku Klux Klan);
2. Single Issue terrorists fixated with one particular ideological issue, such as taxes or abortion;
3. Neo-Nazis who maintain an anti-Semitic, racist, nationalist, and homophobic ideology;
4. Militia and Patriot Movement members skeptical of the centralized government;
5. Christian Identity adherents that believe Whites are the true “chosen people;” and
6. Sovereign Citizens that hold the Federal government is currently illegitimate (Gruenewald et al, 2013).

Some right-wing extremists overlap these types. For example, skinheads come in many varieties, and the violent, racist skinheads float amongst several of the above categories.

Any description of the constellation of right-wing extremist groups is merely a snapshot, as there is a constant churn in the membership and fortunes of any given group. It can be difficult to appreciate the scale and complexity of right-wing extremism in any given country. A right-wing extremist may be a member of several different groups at once

or in rapid succession and may opt to act in accordance with a group’s agenda or independently (Ross, 1992). As Jeffrey Kaplan notes, “Indeed, a researcher would be hard pressed to point to a single individual in the constellation of right wing movements who has not already passed through several ideological way stations, and who no doubt has stops yet to make during his or her life” (Kaplan, 1995, p. 46).

Right-wing extremists usually argue for the innate superiority of the own race or national group, while simultaneously expressing intolerance towards contact or mixing with other cultures, nationalities, or ethnicities, to maintain their “purity” or distinctiveness (Simi et al., 2013; Cotter, 1999). Some take this to represent an existential question, presuming the future extinction of the (loosely-defined) White race, unless action is taken. This is the touchstone for the “14 words” mantra of David Lane – a founding member of The Order – which reads “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children” (Bowman-Grieve, 2009, p. 995). Indeed, some right-wing ideologues have embraced a political theory of race that extends beyond traditional national boundaries. Advocates of the Third Position propose a homogenous nation based on supremacist racial or religious nationalism, which is intended to be a nonpartisan alternative to capitalism and communism (Wright, 2009). The theme that individual liberty (and the White race) is under attack from various quarters is pervasive throughout most right-wing extremist circles. Some believe sovereignty, or their way of life, is endangered or has already been lost, which connects to larger conspiracy theories and a need for survivalism, paramilitary readiness, and violent action (Gruenewald et al., 2013).

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) noted that various right-wing extremists have adopted immigration as a call to action and a recruiting tool, and DHS assessed that “right-wing extremist groups” frustration over a perceived lack of government action on illegal immigration has

the potential to incite individuals or small groups toward violence” (DHS, 2009, p. 5). Nativism is not a new, but it is being combined with a broader set of economic and social concerns to motivate violence. Right-wing ideologues point to globalization, unemployment, growth in non-European populations, and new waves of immigration as a perfect storm against their racial constituency (Wright, 2009). These issues were thrown into sharp relief following 9/11, which these leaders cast as a result of pro-Israel US foreign policy and non-white immigration (Wright). Mark Cotterill, a founder of the American Friends of the British National Party (AFBNP), stated as much in a Fall 2001 speech, stating “Although we are all nationalists, here today we are only one nationality—white. It (immigration) is not an American fight or a British fight or a German fight. It is a white fight, and we have got to win it” (Wright, p. 200). The use of violence is a common feature of right-wing extremists, which is seen as a legitimate and natural means to fight against conspiracies, maintaining their “purity,” and racially cleansing their homelands through intimidation of immigrants and visible minorities (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Cotter, 1999). For right-wing extremists, violence attracts recruits and perpetuates their beliefs through action. For those unable or not yet prepared to carry out attacks, there are a variety of other extremist support activities, such as: listening to White Power music; running extremist websites; producing and sharing extremist materials and videos; hosting extremist radio and TV shows; giving speeches and interviews; attending rallies, conferences, and protests; sending letters and flyers; vandalism; wearing extremist apparel; getting extremists tattoos; and other recruitment activities (Gruenewald et al., 2013).

### **Right-Wing and Religious Extremism Factors in Canada**

Troubled race relations and associated violence have long been a part of the Canadian story. As Jeffrey Ian Ross noted, “Right-wing violence in Canada can be traced back as far as 1784 when

Canada’s first race riot took place in the Nova Scotian towns of Shelburne and Birchtown” (Ross, 1992, p. 77). Racial segregation was legalized in schools in Ontario in 1849 (Barret, 1989), and there was substantial right-wing violence against Chinese and Japanese migrants in British Columbia, as well as general right-wing extremism connected to labor throughout the history of Canada (Ross, 1992). As late as 1953, the Canadian Immigration Act included “climatic suitability” as a factor in determinations, leading some prominent immigration scholars to conclude that Canada’s pre-WWII immigration policy was “formally and explicitly racist” (Barret, 1989, p. 238). So why are few aware right-wing extremism in Canada? There has been little research on the issue, in part due to a lack of data. Again, Ross stated “[O]nly a fraction of all right-wing activity is reported to the media or translated into criminal charges which make their way into the courts or produce written sources available in archives” (Ross, 1992, p. 95).

Aside from common racism, nativism, and anti-Semitism, Canada has also played host to a number of fringe religious communities that have produced violent individuals and terrorist campaigns. One example is the Canadian role in the development of the Christian Identity movement. Christian Identity beliefs grew out of Anglo-Israelism (also called British-Israelism), which was developed by Richard Brothers in Britain in 1794. Brothers claimed that Anglo-Saxons were direct descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel deported by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Kaplan, 1995; Anderson & Sloan, 2003b), but was not strongly anti-Semitic. However, when Canadian W.H. Poole brought Anglo-Israelism to North America, and Canada, the ideology was transformed into the fiercely anti-Semitic Christian Identity theology (Kaplan, 1995). Another Canadian, William J. Cameron used his position as chief spokesman for Henry Ford and editor of the *Dearborn Independent* to spread anti-Semitism south of the border, particularly through the 1920s series “The International Jew.” In the 1930s, prominent figures like Cameron, Howard

Rand, C. F. Parker, and Clem Davies carried out meetings in Vancouver, which were later attended by American right-wing leaders such as Gerald L. K. Smith, Wesley Swift, Bertrand Comperet, William Potter Gale, and Reuben Sawyer, who first brought Christian Identity beliefs to the Ku Klux Klan (Kaplan, 1995). Since that time, Christian Identity teachings have become a major driver inspiring right-wing extremists in North America and beyond, blending together White supremacy and populism (Anderson & Sloan, 2003b). Christian Identity teachings easily meld with other conspiratorial beliefs, and this doctrine helps to unify various right-wing extremists, including groups like the Aryan Nations, Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, skinheads, and general survivalists (Anderson & Sloan, 2003b). This belief system has inspired much of the right-wing terrorism and extremism over the last forty years. Canada's role in ascribing a strongly anti-Semitic bent to the Christian Identity movement should not be overlooked.

### **Extremist Activity and Groups in Canada**

Stanley Barrett observed four historical periods of right-wing extremism in Canada: 1) the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s; 2) Pre-WWII fascism; 3) Neo-Nazism in the 1960s; and 4) Neo-fascism in the 1970s and 1980s, during which some 45 right-wing extremist organizations formed (Barret, 1989). Building on this, Ross described four waves of extremist activity following WWII: 1) Edmund Burke Society attacks against Leftists of the mid-1960s; 2) Western Guard attacks against Communists in the late 1960s; 3) Ku Klux Klan attacks during the mid-1970s and early 1980s; and 4) Skinheads attacks against visible minorities, Jews, and gays (Ross, 1992). His research showed the vast majority of attacks occurred in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, where large visible minority and immigrant populations lived, and still do. (Ross). Barrett too found that for the majority of right-wing extremist groups' membership was concentrated in these provinces, though these groups wanted to mount nationwide campaigns in favor of White supremacy, immigration

reform, and anti-Semitism (Barret, 1989).

Starting in the 1960s, the fascist Canadian Nazi Party, led by John Beattie and David Stanley, garnered significant attention (and protestors) with its outdoor rallies at Allan Gardens in Toronto that drew crowds of close to 5,000 people, and it generated reciprocal opponents like the N3 Fighters Against Racial Hatred. In the 1970s, the Western Guard carried out a series of public attacks in concert with its drive to manipulate public opinion via its propaganda and recorded telephone hate messages. In the 1980s, the Aryan Nations, which was founded on Christian Identity theology, came to Canada, and its national leader, Terry Long, sought to build a training camp in Caroline, Alberta. The Aryan Nations compound in the United States at Hayden Lake, Idaho brought together many different extremists and survivalists, and its prison ministry was seminal in the development of the Aryan Brotherhood. Canadian extremists again reached beyond these shores when the Heritage Front's Wolfgang Droege and Don Andrews represented Canada at Muammar Qaddafi's April 1987 Third Position conference, attended by some 2,000 delegates. Several Canadian groups have had a significant influence on the global right-wing extremist stage, notably the Ku Klux Klan, the Church of the Creator, and Skinheads.

### **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)**

The Ku Klux Klan is the oldest right-wing extremist group active in Canada. The KKK crossed into Canada from the United States in the 1920s, with Klan groups appearing in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec under various names, such as the Kanadian Ku Klux Klan, the Ku Klux Klan of Canada, and the Ku Klux Klan of the British Empire (Barret, 1989). The Ku Klux Klan has thrived on racist, nativist, and anti-Semitic sentiments that have appeared both explicitly and implicitly within the fabric of Canadian history, society, and institutions over time (Barret). A fiercely Protestant



organization, the Ku Klux Klan seeks to defend Western Christian civilization by repatriating or eliminating Jews, visible minorities, homosexuals, Communists, and Catholics (Barret).

A Klan klavern (i.e. klan chapter) appeared in Montreal in 1921, followed by one in Vancouver in 1924. The British Columbia Klan claimed five provincial assemblymen amongst its members, and it built onto extant anti-Asian sentiments and calls for deportation of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian immigrant workers (Barret, 1989). In Alberta, the KKK focused more on European immigrants and Catholics, and the Klan made major inroads in Saskatchewan, boasting between 15,000-40,000 members (Barret). The Canadian Klan was violent from the beginning, starting with a rash of anti-Catholic arsons in 1922 in Quebec, followed by a 1924 arson at St Boniface College in Manitoba that killed 10 Catholic students, another at Juvenaut College, and a church robbery in Samia, Ontario (Ross, 1992).

After WWII, the Klan settled into its familiar pattern of attacks against visible minorities, Leftists, Jewish and immigrant communities. Anti-black violence in August 1965 at Amherstburg, Ontario brought additional notoriety (Ross, 1992). In the 1980s, the Canadian KKK was further influenced by David Duke, and in the early 1990s, Dennis Mahon of Oklahoma also crossed the border to better encourage and network with Canadian klaverns (Kaplan, 1995).

### **Church of the Creator (COTC)**

Ben Klassen, the founder of the Church of the Creator (an anti-Christian, racist organization), developed his ideas during his formative years in Canada from 1925-1945, which included time at the University of Saskatchewan. He later studied at the University of Manitoba, enlisted in the Canadian Officers Training Corps, and hoped to join the Axis forces in Germany.

Klassen established his “church” in the United

States in 1973, and expanded his ideology, “the Creativity” through several books, including *Nature’s Eternal Religion* (1973), *The White Man’s Bible* (1981), and *Salubrious Living* (1982) and the newspaper *Racial Loyalty*. Klassen felt Christianity was fundamentally flawed by recognizing Jews as the chosen people, and he believed that it was a conspiracy to subvert the White race, part of a millennia-long struggle between Jews and whites (Michael, 2006). He felt an original, ethnically-based religion could advance the white race, but felt that the Christian Identity and Odinist movements were misguided and would lead white supremacists astray. Klassen ultimately committed suicide in 1993, but the COTC continued under a series of successors, most notably Matthew Hale.

The Church of the Creator (COTC) is fervently anti-Semitic and racist, and its adherents naturally became involved in random and planned acts of violence, though this conduct was usually disavowed (Kaplan, 1995). The COTC claims to be “a Professional, Non-Violent, Progressive, Pro-White Religion,” promoting “White Civil Rights, White Self-Determination, and White Liberation via 100% legal activism,” but it is also known for developing the concept of “RAHOWA,” an unavoidable “Racial Holy War” (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

The term “RAHOWA” is now used as shorthand by right-wing extremists across the world, spreading far beyond the COTC. For example, the concept of RAHOWA and Creativity were later spread by the Canadian band RAHOWA!, a 1989 Toronto band led by George Burdi, who studied political science at the University of Guelph before spreading Creativity’s teaching to skinheads (Michael, 2006). In 1993, Burdi sought to advance white power music by launching Resistance Records (which was later acquired by William Pierce - chairman of the National Alliance and author of *The Turner Diaries* – the book that motivated the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing) (Michael, 2006). Burdi also organized COTC paramilitary training with a former member of the Canadian

Forces Airborne Regiment, and he had strong ties to Wolfgang Droege of the Heritage Front (Michael, 2006). RAHOWA! earned the ire of reactionary groups, such as Anti-Racist Action. Burdi was later arrested and imprisoned for attempting to circumvent Canadian hate speech laws with his Detroit-based company and dissociated himself after prison.

By some estimates, the World Church of the Creator grew to encompass thousands of members with chapters in half of the US states and several foreign countries (Michael, 2006). Matthew Hale continued to grow the movement, reaching out to women as well as prisoners. Indeed, two members connected to the female prison ministry – Erica Chase and Leo Felton – were arrested for planning to ignite a race war in Boston via a bombing campaign (Michael, 2006). Following 9/11 and Benjamin Smith's shooting spree that killed 9, Hale rose on the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's radar, and he was later imprisoned for 40 years for soliciting the murder of a judge (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Canadians played a major role in the diffusion of Creativity, its associated music, and its concepts like RAHOWA. Creativity has had a disproportionate influence on right-wing extremism across the world, and it has also helped to spread ZOG conspiracies and to further radicalize Odinists and Skinheads (Michael, 2006).

## Skinheads

Adopted from Nazism, the skinhead movement began in East London in the 1960s, then in the 1970s it coalesced with the British punk scene, and by the 1980s it became associated with right-wing groups, like the UK's National Front, which identified immigrants and Jewish elites as the banes of the British working class (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). The white power skinhead band Skrewdriver also sprang from this movement, along with its front-man Ian Stuart, who went on to found Blood & Honour/Combat 18 and spread neo-Nazi skinhead culture (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Cotter, 1999), and would later give inflammatory speeches during his concerts. Many

skinheads are motivated by unemployment, and they attack immigrants out of the belief they are stealing jobs or housing from the white working-class (Cotter, 1999). Many skins feel a global racial kinship to whites in North America, Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia (Cotter, 1999).

Skinheads number in the tens of thousands with members in over 30 different countries, comprising vast transnational networks (Cotter, 1999), and they first came to Canada in the 1980s (Ross, 1992). According to a previous survey of worldwide Neo-Nazi Skinheads by the Anti-Defamation League, Canada was ranked 11th in terms of skinhead activity, which is quite high given the relatively small population of the country (Cotter, 1999). Canadian skins have been labeled anti-American, anti-immigrant, anti-free trade, and anti-homosexual, and many have belonged to the cadet corps or military reserve (Ross, 1992). Canadian skinhead organizations have included Longitude 74, the White Federation, the Aryan Resistance Movement (ARM), and the United Skinheads of Montreal (Ross, 1992), however most skins have no formal organizations, forming loose gangs or free-floating individuals (Cotter, 1999). Skinheads may be Neo-Nazi, Odinist, COTC, or white supremacist in orientation, but there are also non-racist and even anti-racist skins, such as the Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARPs) who wear green jackets (Kaplan, 1995). Despite these variations, the fundamental constants in the skinhead subculture are white power music and violence (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

The Canadian KKK, Church of the Creator, Skinheads, and many other groups have kept right-wing extremism and violence an ever-present threat within the Canadian context. There has also been violence associated with the anti-abortion movement, including cross-border cases like James Charles Kopp. There is growing concern that violence will also erupt from the Freeman on the Land movement and sovereign citizens, who declare themselves to

**Table 3:** Right-Wing Extremist Groups in Canada since 2010

- Aryan Brotherhood	- Legionne Nationale
- Aryan Guard	- National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP)
- Aryan Nations	- National Progressivist Party of Canada
- Blood & Honour	- Nationalist Alliance
- Canadian Ethnic Cleansing Team	- Nationalist Front
- Canadian Heritage Alliance	- National Socialist Party
- Canadian White National Association	- National Socialist Party of Canada (Quebec)
- Church of Creativity	- Northwest Imperative
- Combat 18 (C-18)	- Quebec Radical
- Creativity Movement Toronto	- Quebec Stompers
- Dead Boys Crew	- Ragnarok
- Heritage Front	- Ragnarok Vinland
- KKK: Brotherhood of Knights	- Silingers
- KKK: Canadian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan	- Southern Ontario Skins
- Légion Nationaliste	- TriCity Skins
- Vinland Hammerskins	- Troisieme Wai
- Vinland Warriors	- True White Boys
- Volksfront	- United Klans of Canada
- Waffen	- Vinland Front

be beyond the government’s jurisdiction. More than 35 right-wing extremist groups have been

active in Canada since 2010, but few have successfully carried out violent attacks.

**Assessment and Policy Recommendations**

Canada has been home to a collection of right-wing extremists that have been surprisingly influential in the global movements associated with white supremacy, Neo-Nazism, Identity Christianity, Creativity, skinheads, anti-abortionists, tax protesters, sovereign citizens, and others. Based on historically strong connections and exchanges between Canadian extremists and those abroad, it would be imprudent to presume that Canada is immune to the importation of the rising right-wing extremism in the United States, Europe, and beyond. Where radical beliefs belonging to the KKK were once imported into Canada, ardent anti-Semitic beliefs were exported out of Canada in the form of Identity Christianity and Creativity. Racist

skinhead rock flowed into Canada from Europe, and white power music from RAHOWA! flowed back out. Extremist enterprises have been set up to transfer funds, propaganda, and hate music across borders, and individuals have crossed the same borders to plan or conduct attacks, such as Thomas Lavy and James Kopp. Indeed, national borders are becoming less salient within these circles. Though smaller in size than the US and European counterparts, it would be short-sighted to assume that the Canadian right-wing movement is in a permanent state of disarray or impotence (Barret, 1989). Canadian security officials should remain vigilant in monitoring the wide variety of financial and non-traditional exchanges (music, conspiracy theories, pamphlets, etc.) involved in right-wing circles.

Anti-immigrant sentiment continues to crop up across Canada. A recent example is the anti-immigration flyers from Immigration Watch Canada in Brampton in April 2014 contrasting European and South Asian immigrants, and this particular provocation appears to be a continuation of racist vandalism targeting a Sikh elementary school there in 2012 (Aylward, 2014). There are historical precedents for reciprocal radicalization between right-wing extremists and other groups. For example, there was a clear pattern of KKK rallies in Toronto that would, like clockwork, invite confrontations with visible minorities, Jews, and left-wing groups (Barrett, 1989). Groups like Anti-Racist Action emerged to challenge right-wing extremists head on, and prominent figures like Ernst Zündel often received death threats or were attacked themselves. Similar patterns emerged with white power music concerts and skinhead gatherings, and there were anti-racist skins (SHARPs and others) that formed to fight their racist brethren. Within British Columbia, there were also small-scale, tit-for-tat exchanges between white supremacists and First Nations communities. This exchange included the June 9, 1999 pipe bomb planted in a rest stop by Peter Anthony Houston, who pleaded guilty to intent to cause an explosion and possession of an explosive substance (CBC News, 2009). There was a subsequent conviction for additional, unplanted pipe bombs. As part of this campaign, a skinhead associate of Houston attacked a group of First Nations youth in East Vancouver, and he was, in turn, beaten later by members of the Native Youth Movement. Given the viciousness of right-wing attacks and the propensity of some immigrant communities to feel unprotected by or distrustful of policing and security services, the possibility of reciprocal radicalization seems quite plausible, given historical precedents with other communities targeted by right-wing organizations and individual extremists.

Much of right-wing extremist violence is perpetrated by individuals that are outside of big organizations and only loosely connected to the larger movement, if at all. The radicalization processes of lone operators and small cells are not well-studied, and militating factors are varied and possibly unique for some individuals, making causal analysis difficult (Spaaij, 2010). Canada's Counter-Terrorism Strategy suggests growing recognition of this issue:

*As seen in Oklahoma City in 1995 and in Norway in 2011, continued vigilance is essential since it remains possible that certain groups—or even a lone individual—could choose to adopt a more violent, terrorist strategy to achieve their desired results (Public Safety Canada, 2011).*

More can be done to articulate the threat, as well as the history of political violence and extremism in Canada. It is crucial that the public, including marginalized and affected communities, support counter violent extremism measures. Ultimately, the success of any security policy rests upon its legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Providing clear-eyed assessments, accessible information, and evidence-based policy are the keys to ensuring a safe and secure Canada.

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## **PART II**

### Countering the Narrative of Violent Extremists





## Challenging the Narrative of the “Islamic State”

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The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has been a product, in part, of state failure, civil war and the repression of Sunnis by the Shi'ite government of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and by the atrocities of the regime of Bashar al-Assad against his own people in Syria (Cordall, 2014). Almost as much, however, it is the product of the will to power of a branch of a broader Islamist movement that has been active in Iraq for more than a decade, following the American intervention in Iraq in 2003.

Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi since May 2010, ISIS is a jihadi *takfiri*<sup>2</sup> terrorist organization that now controls, to varying degrees, about one third of northern Syria and one third of north-western Iraq, an area inhabited originally by 5-6 million people of which 500,000 or more have fled. While estimates about the size of ISIS range from as low as 20,000 to as high as 100,000 and beyond (Beauchamp, 2015), this is not seemingly enough to hold and govern such a vast territory with millions of people, except by a regime of terror under which a so far unknown (but high) number of people have been demonstratively killed in order to intimidate the rest. (UNHCR, 2014).

While controlling substantial areas of land - something unusual for terrorist organizations - ISIS is also very much present in cyberspace, where its claims too often go unchallenged. With its propaganda in social media, and with some of its video footage also broadcast in mainstream media, ISIS has caught the imagination of a considerable number of young Muslims all over the world with its violent messages and catchy slogans. Its apparent success has also led to a modest number of conversions to Islam among mainly marginalized non-Muslim youths in Western countries, as well as attracted Muslims from Western and non-Western countries to travel to Iraq and Syria. At the same time, it has also filled with terror those who have to endure its harsh rule and those who are facing ISIS fighters at the front lines in Syria and Iraq. The media campaign of ISIS is very professional by any standards, with high-quality visual footage and well-crafted ideological statements attracting young Muslims and some recent converts to Islam to join its ranks. Per day, ISIS produces up to 90,000 Tweets and other social media responses – a volume of activity unmatched by government counter-messaging (Schmitt, 2015). According to the American FBI director, James Comey, ISIS has been issuing statements in almost two dozen languages (Sullivan, 2014).

In order to break the present momentum of ISIS, the use of military force in Iraq and Syria is not enough. What is needed is a counter-narrative that can seriously challenge and undermine the narrative of ISIS.

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<sup>2</sup> *Takfir* refers to the practice of excommunicating Muslims judged to be insufficiently dedicated to their faith and to sharia rule. Pronouncing against someone *takfir* turns those targeted into unbelievers (*kufar*) who can be killed (Esposito, 2003).

Crafting such a counter-narrative is also necessary to slow down if not stop the flow of misled foreign fighters to ISIS. So far more some 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries have gone to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other jihadist organizations in this cross-border theatre of war (Zelin, 2015). Some 5,000 of the foreign fighters are said to originate from Western democracies, with most of them having an immigration background.

In the following, an attempt will be made to provide arguments to counter a dozen claims of ISIS which form key parts of its narrative. The counter-messaging arguments suggested below might, after further refinement, be utilized in counter-speech acts by those attempting to prevent individuals from joining the ranks of foreign fighters. While some experts claim the appeal of ISIS has little or nothing to do with religion but is more a reflection of a youth revolt among Muslims, the position taken here is that ideology and religion are crucial and central for *legitimizing* jihadist violence caused by a variety of mainly political factors (Wood, 2015). This is not to deny that individual, social and generational conflicts that play a role in radicalisation, both for those foreign fighters who come from Western diasporas as well as those who originate in Muslim-majority countries (e.g. Turkey), where young people are often well-integrated in their societies. While the fanatical extremists of ISIS might no longer be open to rational, persuasive arguments, many of those not yet fully radicalized might still have open minds. They can be confronted with facts and rational reasoning and might then be able to see ISIS for what it is: a millenarian “death cult” that discredits rather than defends Islam (Weiss & Hassan, 2015).

In the following, a dozen claims and statements found in ISIS propaganda are identified<sup>3</sup> and an attempt is made to counter these on a number of grounds – historical, theological and otherwise.<sup>4</sup> It is held that ISIS’ ‘selling points’ play a major role in attracting foreign fighters to its ranks. While most people are appalled by the brutality of ISIS, a minority of born Muslims and converts to Islam are attracted to it, because or despite the violence (Uhlmann, 2015). The pronouncements and slogans of ISIS therefore need to be taken seriously and need to be dissected and discussed; they cannot be simply dismissed as ideology and propaganda.

Let us look at some of the main claims, slogans and statements of ISIS.

## Twelve Claims by ISIS and Arguments to Counter These

### Claims by ISIS about Islam and Muslims

*into a Counter-Message:*

#### Claim No. 1:

ISIS claims that it stands for pure and unadulterated Islam.

The historical record (as opposed to faith-based accounts) offers only dim glimpses of the origins of Islam in its first decades of existence. Therefore, any effort to return to the golden age of the first three generations of successors of the

#### Ad 1: *Argumentative elements for possible incorporation*

3 These claims have been identified by TRI Research Associate Dr. Philipp Holtmann, based on his ongoing analysis of ISIS’ Internet output.

4 A more comprehensive critique would draw from at least ten different sources and frameworks: (1) history of Islam; (2) four main Islamic jurisprudential schools and their fatwas; (3) international humanitarian law; (4) moral standards as they exist in human rights documents, including Islamic and Arabian human rights texts; (5) the (political) self-interest of the constituency for which IS claims to speak; (6) the special interests of women and religious minorities; (7) the juxtaposition of ISIS’ own practices with its declaratory policies; (8) witness accounts of people who have broken ranks with the Islamic State; (9) victim and survivor accounts of those who have experienced IS practices first-hand; (10) internal documents from IS found on computers and in safe houses.

Prophet involves, to some degree, the (re-) invention of a lost tradition.

According to Muslims, Allah revealed himself over a period of 23 years to Muhammad, whose words were written down by others only after his death in 632 CE. A multiplicity of Muslim interpretations exists on the Quran, on Muhammad's exemplary way of life and on Islamic law (*sharia*). These can be used to challenge ISIS and its claim to a monopoly of interpretation. This fact could be emphasized to encourage a more skeptical view among susceptible target audiences towards ISIS' argument that it represents the "pure and unadulterated Islam" (Küng, 2006; Vanya, 2014).

Some critical scientific studies, which have attempted to get closer to the oldest versions of the Quran, have come up with findings that tend to challenge Salafist interpretations. Some of the Quran researchers who deal with the etymology of the sacred text claim that this also concerns crucial topics, such as the rewards of a "martyr" in paradise: when being retranslated and redacted, they suggest that the heavenly offering might consist of sweet white raisins rather than virgins (Luxenburg, 2000; Küng, 2006; Al-Azmeh, 2014). This could be a vantage point for degrading certain doctrines and key-discourses of ISIS. The claim of ISIS to stand for "pure and unadulterated Islam" therefore is just that – a claim among other claims with no better proof of correctness. However, by their close (but superficial) imitation of alleged and partly real historical practices from the early days of Islam following what it claims "the Prophetic methodology" (Wood, 2015), ISIS hope to gain legitimacy, denouncing those who diverge from its version of Islam as *takfir*.

#### **Claim No. 2:**

ISIS claims that Muslims are persecuted and their rights violated all over the world and that the only solution to stop this is to fight back.

**Ad 2:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

In order to claim the moral high ground, ISIS often portrays its war as defensive rather than as offensive. In its black-and-white ideology it depicts itself as heroic defenders of the Muslim world – the ummah (community of Muslims) - against Western colonization and the domination of Arab and other Muslim lands through pro-Western Muslim rulers who are portrayed as puppets of the West.

Yet, the facts suggest that Muslims are indeed not persecuted "all over the world." The largest persecutions often take place in Muslim majority countries themselves (Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Sudan) and often both perpetrators and victims are Muslims. A comparison of religious persecutions in Christian and Muslim countries has shown that large-scale persecutions are ten times more often taking place in Muslim-majority countries (Grim & Finke, 2007). For example, the slow-motion genocide in Darfur (costing more than 250,000 victims since 2003) is perpetrated by Arab Muslims against African Muslims and neither ISIS nor other jihadist organisations have raised a finger in the defense of African Muslims in Darfur. ISIS itself is now a prime example of engaging in active religious persecution on a large scale.

#### **Claim No. 3:**

According to its online magazine *Dabiq*, ISIS claims that true Islam can only be established by the sword. This means that members of other religions and sects, including the monotheist ones (Jews, Christians), can be subjugated, forced to convert or be killed (*Dabiq*, Issues 1-4).

**Ad 3:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

An appropriate counter-narrative to this claim would be to emphasize the historical cases in which many people have converted to Islam by persuasion, rather than by force. In the case of Islam's expansion in the 7th century, the *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World* notes that "This expansion was primarily a cultural phenomenon but it was also

a significant chapter in military history” (Nicolle, 2003, p. 48). While we only have very limited evidence about conversions in the early days of Islam, people were usually encouraged and not coerced to become Muslims. After conversion they would no longer have to pay a special poll tax (*jizya*) levied on non-Muslims who wanted to enjoy the protection of Muslim rulers. Other “People of the Book,” such as Christians and Jews, could gain the status “protected” (*dhimmi*), but were not allowed to ride horses or carry weapons - so there was also a material incentive for them to accept Islam.

However, having said that, there are numerous *hadiths* (9th and 10th century accounts of what the Prophet and other early Muslims allegedly said or did, as reported by his closest companions (Esposito, 2003)), which stress the importance of expanding Islam “by the sword,” i.e. by war (Sookhdeo, 2008). On the other hand, the Prophet Muhammad is also quoted as saying “let there be no compulsion in religion” (Quran, 2:256). ISIS narratives exploit the problem of contradictory messages by claiming that the later (more intolerant) statements of the Quran from the Medina period invalidate the (more conciliatory) earlier statements of the Prophet from his period in Mecca (Gabriel, 2004).

The ISIS narrative also regards “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews) as second-class citizens in their societies, a view that stems from some forms of Salafi Islam. For ISIS and other jihadi extremists, the “People of the Book” and unbelievers who do not submit to rules set by them, can be subjugated, enslaved, expelled or even killed. However, this view is widely contested by mainstream Islam. One of the challenges of religious texts— not just the Quran - is that passages that are time- and context-specific are applied in new and modern situations. Muslim scholars have interpreted passages of the Quran and the *hadiths* in many different ways; for almost every example one can find a counter-examples and, in some cases, even a counter-counter-example. This

is also true for those passages in the Quran that advocate killing of opponents (e.g. Surah 9:5). Yet the Quran contains also passages that oppose the killing of innocent people, for example, the often-quoted Surah 5:32 (Hermann, 2015).

### Claims by ISIS about Violence

#### Claim No. 4:

According to some ISIS clerics, civil strife (*fitna*) is a positive thing because in its course the true believers come to the surface, distinguishing them from the heretics and hypocrites.

**Ad 4:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

*Fitna* literally means “to burn,” but is also referring to temptation, probation, to put to the test, distress, discord, riot, civil strife, rebellion against the divine order. *Fitna* is seen as a situation to be avoided at almost all costs by mainstream Islam. The term has multiple uses, referring inter alia to “sedition” and trial (testing by temptation), which can lead to deserting one’s faith. The Prophet himself called *fitna* “worse than killing” (Quran 2:217). The first major civil war of the Islamic Caliphate, lasting from 656-661, is generally referred to as the “First *Fitna*.” Some of the supporters of ISIS apparently see *fitna* as not that destructive, because in their view the *ummah* is in such a catastrophic shape that civil strife can only lead to a better situation. In addition, they might use the word in the sense of “to put to test” which is but one of the many meanings.

Even if we accept that interpretation, the question remains by what test “heretics” and “hypocrites” can be distinguished from “true believers.” In the history of Islam, there is not a historical record of a test during the various *fitan* (*pl. of fitna*) since the 7th century were of any help in distinguishing “true believers” from “hypocrites” and “heretics,” as ISIS claims.

As to the “true” in “true believers”: ISIS followers and sympathizers should be confronted with alternative Islamic narratives, which stand for open and rational interpretations of Islam as these existed for centuries, not just in the rich medieval history of Islamic civilizations, but well into the 19th century. Looking at this half-forgotten tradition, Muslims might be able to challenge the “truth vs. untruth” discourse of IS-followers and help to highlight nuanced Muslim interpretations that differ from those of ISIS scholars.

**Claim No. 5:**

ISIS claims that a Muslim has to pass through the stage of violent *jihad* in order to enter paradise. *Jihad* is even a precondition for the establishment of the *ummah*, since otherwise no separation can take place between *mu'minin* (believers), *munaḥiqin* (hypocrites) and *kuffar* (unbelievers). The process of ruthless separation must be continued until the two camps are completely separated: the camp of *iman* (belief) vs. the camps of *nifaq* and *kufr* (disbelief) (Al-Awlaki, 2014).

**Ad 5: Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:**

*Jihad* has been interpreted by Muslims in several ways. One distinction is between the “greater I,” which means restraining oneself from committing immoral acts considered to be transgressions against divine law and striving to become a better person, and the “minor *jihad*,” which refers to the fight for righteousness and to helping the subjects of injustice but also to the defense and the active propagation of faith by armed force. This particular meaning of a violent “holy war” is the prevalent one in the Quran. The first part of this ISIS claim appears to be inspired by a *hadith* attributed to Mohammed, which says: “Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords.” *Jihad* in the sense of “greater *jihad*,” as an attempt of each and every one to overcome base instincts in an effort to better one’s character by dedication and self-discipline is a valid concept that should, in counter-narratives, be stressed over

the violent “lesser *jihad*.”

One possibility in countering the narrative of this *hadith*, as is the case with many others, is to question the authenticity (Esposito, 2006). The Prophet has said different things under different circumstances, for example, that “Paradise is at the feet of mothers (Der Spiegel, 2014, p. 60)” – a statement hard to combine with the one about the “shades of swords.” A possible counter-message could be: if the *ummah*, the community of Muslims, can only be established by the sword, which involves violence, it will lead to resentment and resistance among those coerced into the correct belief – something that cannot be conducive to establishing a harmonious community which the *ummah* is supposed to be.

Termining the ongoing armed conflict between Sunni and Alawite Muslims in Syria and the one between Sunni and Shia in Iraq as a *jihad*, as ISIS does, should also be countered with opposing evidence. One possible counter message is to discuss the meaning of *jihad* contrary to the terms of sectarianism. Various religious authorities in Islam, among them more moderate clerics involved in the Syrian revolution/civil war, such as the Islamic Body of Greater Syria (*Hay'at al-Sham al-Islamiyya*), have expressed themselves in this sense (Religious Rehabilitation Group, 2014). Moreover, non-sectarian violence can be highlighted as a possible counter-message. For example, part of the casualties in Syria (some 250,000 fatalities and nearly one million injured) were not the result of clashes between the troops of the Alawite Assad dictatorship and Syrian Sunni resistance fighters but resulted from clashes between jihadist Sunni Muslims, especially those of the Islamic State and the Al-Nusra Front (BBC, 2014).

**Claim No. 6:**

ISIS claims, citing the words of al-Zarqawi, that “the honorable resistance“ has noble and great *Sharia* aims. All *jihad* exerted by the resistance is for the benefit of the Muslim people. The *jihad* of the resistance is not a limited *jihad* to redraw

the borders of the Sykes-Picot agreement, but is a worldwide *jihad*.<sup>5</sup>

**Ad 6:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

One way to counter this narrative is to discredit the narrator, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who set up “the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad” (*JTJ - Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*) in 1999 and, by 2004, pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden as he established al-Qaeda in Iraq (*AQI, a.k.a. Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*). Upon his death in October 2006 by American forces, his followers created the umbrella organization Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) with precursors to ISIS.

However, al-Zarqawi’s resistance against the American intervention was not very “honorable” as claimed by ISIS in terms of his treatment of Muslim people. His cruelty distanced himself from Al-Qaeda’s leadership, so much so that Al-Qaeda’s second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, had to warn him in July 2005 that by killing innocent Muslim Shia civilians he alienated people from Al-Qaeda (“ISIS: Portrait,” 2014). A citizen of Jordan, Zarqawi had started his career as a criminal. His Islamic theological credentials were minor if not totally absent (in that he differs from the new caliph, sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is said to hold a doctorate in Islamic studies). As to his *jihad* being for the “benefit of the Muslim people”: most of Zarqawi’s victims were Shia Muslims. He referred to them as “human scum” and “poisonous snakes” (“ISIS: Portrait,” 2014, p. 24).

Moreover, ISIS has to expand its territory by necessity as its economic model is based on continuous plunder rather than the creation of wealth on the territory it holds. Thus, another example of how ISIS’ aims are not favorable to all Muslims is

in its systematic murder of tribal leaders in Iraq’s al-Anbar province indicates that it seeks to terrorize and subdue Sunni Muslims there rather than work for them and with them (Soufan Group, 2014).

### Claims by ISIS about Leadership

#### Claim No. 7:

ISIS claims that, under present circumstances, Muslim unity becomes mandatory and that therefore it becomes a religious obligation to unify under a single leader.<sup>6</sup>

**Ad 7:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

Religious movements have a tendency to split rather than to unify and Islam is no exception to this rule. Its most prominent split is the one between Sunni and Shia, which is more than 1300 years old. Within Sunni Islam itself there are, as within Shia Islam, sects and sub-groups. There is no indication at all that they will unite in the near future. Rather, they are likely, if attacked by ISIS, to put up a fight and offer resistance. While more than half a dozen of AQ’s affiliates have, in recent months, declared allegiance to ISIS, recent splits among some of these affiliates also indicate that not everybody is willing to throw in his lot with ISIS.

Moreover, the majority of Muslims do not ascribe to ISIS’ ideology or call to action. In fact, a public opinion poll among Arab Muslims, conducted by the Doha-based Arab Centre for Research and Policy, surveying public opinion in seven countries, found that 85 percent of respondents had a negative opinion about ISIS (Ghanmi, 2014). Chances that more Muslims rally behind ISIS are small as the extreme violence (crucifixions, stoning, beheadings, amputations, rapes, mass killings

5 See lecture 5, “Series of the Life From the Words of the ‘Ulamā’ on the Project of the Islamic State“. As to the context: In February 2014, the organisation used a 2006 lecture by Abu Mu’sab al-Zarqawi, former leader of *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* and founder of the original cell of IS (Islamic State of Iraq, f. 2006) to demonstrate strategic continuity and build support for its imminent declaration of the caliphate.

6 This is another argument of al-Muhajir in the context of the establishment of IS, probably in 2006. Republished by IS in 2014, in lecture No. 7.

of prisoners) disgust large majorities of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. When ISIS advanced in Iraq, over half a million civilians fled in one week - hardly a sign of welcoming unity under ISIS. The Jordanian-Palestinian writer Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a respected voice among Salafists, has accused ISIS of driving a wedge between Muslims – the very opposite of the unity sought by ISIS (al-Maqdisi, 2014).

### **Claim No. 8:**

ISIS claims to be the bearer of legitimate religious authority over all Muslims, which gives it the right to re-establish the caliphate (Holtmann, “The Different Functions,” 2014).<sup>7</sup>

**Ad 8:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

ISIS has adopted a popular variation of the jihadi standard banner used since the 1980s, a black flag with a white circle in the middle that encloses the seal of the Prophet with the words “God Messenger Muhammad.” Its leader has declared himself caliph (meaning a “successor” who was meant to be the vice-regent of Muhammad). The title “Caliph” has been used for Islamic rulers overseeing religious and political affairs of an Islamic community, while “caliphate” refers to the territory or state ruled by the caliph (Religious Rehabilitation Group “The Fallacies,” 2014). The caliph was originally a politico-religious leader who headed the Muslim nation (*imam*) and also acted as supreme military commander (*amir al-mu'minin*). This dual function has, however, disappeared after the reigns of the first four caliphs. The last (Ottoman) Islamic caliphate came to an end in 1924 when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in his secularization and modernization campaign for Turkey, abolished the institution headed by the last caliph Abdulmecid II. After a hiatus of 90 years, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi had himself declared “Caliph” of a worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014.

However, according to one Islamic scholar, Rusydi ‘Alyan (in his book *Al-Islam wa al-Khilafah*, 1996), a caliph” has to have a “profound knowledge of Sharia law” (which the new caliph probably has) and “being fair, virtuous, dignified, mature and sane.” (Holtmann, “The Different Functions,” 2014, p. 6). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has already shown not to be the latter. For example, the instant *sharia*-based punishments of their courts do not meet any fair trial standards, the manner women are sold in slave markets is neither virtuous nor dignified. He might be “mature” and “sane” but that alone would hardly qualify him to be “Caliph Ibrahim.”

### **Claims by ISIS about the Caliphate**

In Islamic history the caliphate was a contested institution – three out of the first four so-called Rightly Guided Caliphs (Umar, Uthman and Ali) died by assassination. Discord after the death of the Prophet at the time of the Rightly Guided (*Rashidun*) Caliphs (632 – 661 CE) even reached a point where some of the Prophet’s companions called for “jihad against the Caliph” (Madelung, 2014, pp. 11-12). What ISIS presents is a “romanticized history of the Caliphate,” as R. B. Furlow and his colleagues have noted. They added that ISIS portrays “...the Caliphate as a glorious, shining kingdom on a hill, while editing out inconvenient historical details that plagued the Caliphates from the time of Muhammed’s death” (Furlow et al., p. 1). Many claims of ISIS refer to the Caliphate. The desire to re-establish a caliphate has been popular in broader Muslim circles for almost a century. It was a bold move of ISIS to address this widespread wish for a new Caliphate. It has certainly helped to increase the stream of young Muslim recruits to Syria and Iraq since mid-2014.

Several ISIS claims refer to the caliphate, including the following.

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the major claims of ISIS, since legitimacy means support and fosters leadership aspirations. The IS power claim is based on adaptations of classical Islamic stipulations regarding the investment of a caliph and the special and general mechanisms that lend legitimacy to the investiture and proclamation of the caliph, such as “pledges of investiture” and “popular pledges of obedience”.

**Claim No. 9:**

ISIS claims that the IS-caliphate is the true land of Islam and emigration (*hijrah*) to the land of Islam is obligatory. Whoever joins IS will find great rewards in this world and in the hereafter (*Dabiq*, 2014, Issues 1-4).

**Ad 9: Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:**

The claim that those who join ISIS will get heavenly rewards goes back to numerous verses in the Quran that call for fighting and claim that it is binding upon believers to fulfill God's commands and obey His leadership (*hidaya*). In exchange, believers will gain heavenly rewards in the Hereafter (Quran, 9). However, the ISIS-discourse is based on an uncompromising, literal and non-contextual interpretation of such verses and can be seriously challenged. For example, indiscriminate violence and brutal terrorist practices do not deserve any rewards. Credible Muslim opinion makers who interpret these verses in their respective historical and political contexts should continue to be involved in any project that challenges the narrative of the Islamic State. Their voices need to be heard more loudly in the Islamic world.

In parallel, one should also stress that the history of failed Western policies in Muslim countries must not be countered by attacks against civilians who are in most cases themselves Muslims and who cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of some members of political elites. By being self-critical one gains trust and can facilitate the task to inspire Muslim audiences to become more self-critical as well, especially towards brutal discourses and deeds from members from their own ranks. If the IS-caliphate is indeed the "true land of Islam," moderate Muslims will find it difficult to square such a "truth" with some of the actual practices of ISIS, such as:

- **War crimes:** the mass killings of Shia prisoners of war and the ethnic cleansing of Assyrian Christians, Turkmen and Shabak Shia; beheading of foreign journalists; killing of non-believers and heretics based on ISIS' takfir ideology; destruction of places of religious worship; burning of people in cages and throwing homosexuals from high buildings.
- **Crimes against humanity:** the selling of 5,000 -7,000 Yazidi women and children into slavery; attempted genocide of Yazidis;
- **Human rights abuses:** e.g. the ill-treatment of civilians, including women and children; abduction and torture of boys from Kobane; the brainwashing of children and the recruitment of child soldiers as young as nine years old; use of people with mental or physical illnesses as suicide bombers; subjecting women to sexual violence and systematic rape.

Large majorities of Muslims reject tactics used by ISIS. A Pew public opinion survey held in 2013 found that:

*In most countries where the questions [regarding legitimacy of suicide bombings in defense of Islam] was asked, roughly three-quarters or more Muslims rejected suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilians. And in most countries, according to this survey, the prevailing view is that such acts are never justified as a means of defending Islam from its enemies (Pew Research, 2013)<sup>8</sup>.*

The record of ISIS so far covers the full spectrum of crimes, from individual murder of children to attempted genocide. The gap between the declaratory policy of ISIS – its claim to be the "true land of Islam" - and its actual record of war crimes, gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity on the ground is probably the most powerful argument in efforts to counter the

<sup>8</sup> There are some countries in which substantive minorities think violence against civilians is at least sometimes justified. This view is particularly widespread among Muslims in the Palestinian territories (40%), Afghanistan (39%), Egypt (29%) and Bangladesh (26%). The readiness to accept violence against civilians seems to be context-dependent. It rises in places suffering from brutal state suppression, poverty and long civil-war histories



ideological narrative of ISIS. Muslim witnesses to such crimes by ISIS should be given ample voice in counter-narratives.

**Claim No. 10:**

ISIS claims that there is a wonderful brotherhood among IS-followers. Every capable person should rush forward to join this brotherhood and perform emigration (*hijrah*) to the land of jihad, or at least spiritual emigration away from the values of the infidel societies in which many Muslims live.

**Ad 10:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

The claim of a brotherhood among the ISIS fighters has elements of truth as it is well known that men tend to bond in battle. However, there are also tales coming from the ranks of ISIS of bitter disputes that can be highlighted as effective counter-narratives. For example, given the fact that Muslims fight Muslims in Syria and Iraq and *jihad* refers to the defense of the faith against unbelievers, it is difficult to view the conflict in Syria (and its spill-over into Iraq) as *jihad*. As the Singapore-based Religious Rehabilitation Group, in a brochure over “The Syrian Conflict” writes:

*The conflict in Syria has led to confusion about the obligation of jihad among many Muslims. Many Muslims are being misled into thinking that fighting in Syria is an act of jihad. This is not true. The Syrian conflict is a sectarian war among Muslims in Syria. It is about political power and influence and determining who has control of land and resources.(...) It is not about defending the faith of the ummah (Religious Rehabilitation Group “The Syrian Conflict,” 2014, p. 2).*

Some of the foreign fighters who flocked to Syria and Iraq have begun to realize this and disillusionment has set in. The tales of those who return home disillusioned are feared by ISIS. More than 100 foreign fighters who tried to make it back home have been executed by ISIS, apparently in an effort to prevent some uncomfortable truths from gaining publicity (“IS has Executed,”

2014). Among those who stay, whether or not the “wonderful brotherhood” remains “wonderful” can also be doubted. What many of these foreign fighters tend to forget are the long-term consequences of wartime traumas on their mental health. Veterans often become depressed and not infrequently suicidal without appropriate psychological counseling. For example, the experience of many Taliban fighters who became drug addicts, paranoid and depressed should be a warning to foreign fighters joining ISIS.

**Claim No. 11:**

The IS-caliphate is the true new nucleus of the land of Islam and emigration (*hijra*) to it is prescribed and obligatory. ISIS claims that it is an individual obligation (*wajib ‘ayni*) for all Muslims skilled in Islamic legal, administrative, health and military affairs to join IS in order to assist in the construction of a viable state (*Dabiq*, 2014, Issues 1-4).

**Ad 11:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

The call to perform *hijrah* - which means both emigration and withdrawal from an un-Islamic society to a Muslim one is one of the most powerful instruments in the Islamic tradition as it implies following in the footsteps of the Prophet. ISIS makes clever use of it to lure vulnerable young Muslim to its state-building project.

It is a standard tenet of militant Salafism that *jihad* is the personal duty of every Muslim (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2014). Yet mainstream Islam only knows five duties; the alleged sixth personal duty to perform *jihad* is based on later interpretations of *jihad* by medieval Islamic jurists like Ibn Taymiyya and by modern Islamists like Sayyid Qutb. It is not contained in texts from early “authentic” Islam.

**Claim No. 12:**

IS claims that it is capable of hitting Western interests all over the world by means of its affiliates,

with the number of highly motivated, dedicated followers growing by the day.

**Ad 12:** *Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message:*

This is part of ISIS self-glorifying propaganda and psychological warfare. ISIS' motto is "Remaining and expanding." So far ISIS' direct attacks have been largely limited to Syria and Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, Libya, Tunisia and Lebanon). However, since mid-2014 a number of lone actors appear to have been inspired by ISIS strategic commands. They have perpetrated terrorist attacks in places as far away as Canada, in addition to those conducted in Europe. This behaviour is in line with ISIS' "virtual leadership" paradigm, a long-range command and control pattern, in which ideology and strategic guidance via the media are supposed to inspire, if not guide supporters' attacks in the West (Holtmann, "Online and Offline Pledges," 2014; Franco, 2014).

However, this strategy backfires against ISIS goal to create a viable state. Attacks in the West will only strengthen the resolve of the coalition of more than sixty states that has been brought together by the United States to fight ISIS. This coalition includes Western, neutral and Muslim countries. The escalation potential of these states is infinitely greater than the one of ISIS. By taking on the whole world, ISIS - which might have had a chance of survival as a Sunni state next to a Kurdish and a Shi'ite state in a fragmenting Iraq

- is digging its own grave. It might take months or even years but ISIS as a state (not as an underground terrorist movement) looks doomed. Loosing ground in Syria and in Iraq, it is likely that ISIS might seek to regroup in other places. On the other hand, its internal divisions might break it up before it can break out. While each of its acts of terrorism has produced terror, even more so, it also produces resistance to terror. Nonetheless, in the short and medium term the group is a major destabilizer in the region. Its apocalyptic belief that the End of Times are near and that the final battle will be fought and won in Dabiq (Syria), accounts for its fanaticism.

ISIS' military strength and the degree of support it receives from former Baathist officers and Sunni tribes in Anbar is subject to speculation and dispute; one account mentions some 25,000 fighters of which about half are foreigners and the remainder come from Syria and Iraq while others arrive at higher estimates (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2014). Of the 5,000 or so foreign fighters who came from Western countries, many have already died, some have decided to remain in the Islamic Caliphate and some have returned while others who wanted to return have reportedly been killed by ISIS to avoid that they could reveal some ugly truths upon return. How high the threat emanating from those who have returned for the West is, is difficult to assess beforehand but it is a gross exaggeration to say that they are "capable of hitting Western interest all over the world," as ISIS claims.

## Conclusion

This exercise of taking a number of ISIS claims and attempting to counter them has shown the potential of this approach – not more. What is needed is a concerted and systematic approach, based on synergetic inter-disciplinary team-work, aimed at developing counter-messages, counter-speech, counter-arguments and counter-narratives. Subsequently, these have to be tested with audiences that have a cultural affinity to the main target groups. As far as Western democracies are concerned, the target group consists of vulnerable young Muslims who might become foreign fighters or domestic terrorists if they are not stopped on their trajectory of radicalization. After such testing and appropriate re-calibration of texts, counter-arguments and messages like the ones tentatively sketched here might be ready for use by credible Muslim

voices who wish to engage terrorist ideologues and their potential followers with rational or faith-based arguments. It is vital that Muslim scholars are involved in all phases of developing such counter-narratives, not just at the delivery end. While the jihadist ideologues themselves might well be beyond their reach due to the fanatically closed minds (“Salafists only listen to Salafists,” as one of them put it), rebellious young men tempted by Salafist jihadi messages might still be susceptible to the voice of reason, appealing to their own self-interest and to their inner voice of humanity, the voice of their better self which is also the one of the “greater *jihad*.”

Terrorism is a combination of violence and propaganda. Counter-terrorism has so far mainly targeted the former and neglected the latter. The use of kinetic force against terrorists in the “war on terror” has, in more than a decade of counter-terrorism, in many cases been unproductive and downright counter-productive in other cases. It has been very costly in terms of lives and money lost. On the other hand, efforts to counter the ideology that drives terrorism have not made much progress in all these years, for lack of funding as well as for lack of development of effective and tested soft power instruments that target the hearts and minds of would-be jihadists. It is high time to invest more in developing better counter-messages and more persuasive counter-narratives which appeal to Muslims on both the emotional and the intellectual level.

Since counter-narratives are only defensive, it is even more necessary to develop credible alternative narratives – narratives that can give a new sense of purpose, meaning and hope to those who feel that they have no future in their and our societies. Those in positions of authority have to show them that we do not live in blocked societies where positive change can come only by means of violence. Policy-makers have to listen not only to the grievances of young people but also address their hopes and their expectations for the future and they have to enable young people to actively shape their own future in pluralistic, open societies. The destructiveness of terrorism has to be shown to be futile and has to be opposed by a new constructiveness.

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## Countering Online Violent Extremism in Australia: Research and preliminary findings

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**KEYWORDS:** *online violent extremism; Internet and social media; audience responses; counter narrative development*

The nexus between online content and radicalisation towards violent extremism is a priority area of concern in Australia. The Australian government recently announced its intention to focus on combatting online radicalisation. The presence of violent extremist content online has grown exponentially in the past decade or so as the internet and social media platforms have become integral tools in the violent extremist repertoire used to inform, influence and recruit support for their cause. While research into the forms and structure of violent extremist content online is fairly well developed, there is little empirical evidence to support the development of counter strategies including online counter narratives.

This paper reports on a continuing research program to counter violent extremism online. The program focuses primarily on understanding the role of the internet in radicalisation and on developing online counter narratives to interrupt radicalisation. It comprises several discrete research projects exploring how users interact with online content in order to develop understanding of how such content influences radicalisation. Despite growing interest into the role of the internet and social media in the process of radicalisation, we are still no closer to understanding why some individuals engage with online violent extremist content in ways that influence their offline behaviour. Nor are we any closer to understanding why the messages of global jihadi movement groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS) appeal to some individuals but not to others. A vast body of research into the content and constructs of violent extremist online messaging has been produced. This research has illuminated the ways in which violent extremists construct their messages, the master narratives they employ and how they utilise the internet and social media to disseminate their messages. However to make assumptions about the appeal and influence of such online content ignores the fact that those who receive and engage with violent extremist messages do so in conditions which influence how they interpret and act on those messages. The assumption that online narratives and messages have a direct impact on the attitudes and behaviours of their target audience is questionable and deserves further exploration. By examining how internet users receive, engage with and interpret online messages, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the internet in radicalisation and how to effectively counter the phenomenon of online radicalisation.

The research framework for the Countering Online Violent Extremism Research (CoVER) Program at Curtin University is based on a media theory approach that recognises audiences as active agents in the communication process. Accordingly, it is not sufficient to study only the messages that are disseminated via online mediums. Rather the focus of inquiry is on the ways in which the receivers of messages (the audience) interact with the message, the medium and the conditions under which these interactions occur (Aly, 2012). The framework involves three levels of analysis- each yielding different insights that collectively inform an understanding of how and why terroristic online narratives are constructed and deconstructed in different ways by different people.

The first level of analysis involves examinations of online violent extremist content in order to develop understanding of what terrorists are saying and who they are speaking to. It also involves quantitative measures of who is actually receiving these messages. Such measures may not produce anything more insightful than broad demographics but potentially could yield empirical observations about the characteristics and habits of users who are participating in interactive relationships around terroristic online content.

The second level of analysis applies Media Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 1983) to develop a better understanding of why individuals and groups of individuals use the internet and how online content serves certain social and psychological functions. Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a framework for examining how users' needs that are shaped by their social roles and psychological predispositions are gratified by the attributes, the content and the context of different media platforms. Contemporary approaches to Uses and Gratifications Theory recognise four needs: information, personal identity, social integration/ interaction and entertainment.

Media Uses and Gratifications describes how needs motivate media use and how media content can satisfy social and psychological needs, but it does not give comprehensive consideration to the psychological dispositions, sociological factors or context in which media use occurs. Nor does it consider that needs and uses are not static, but instead are influenced by external factors such as life events or global trends. As such, this level of analysis offers insights into why people engage with violent extremist content online but not the social realities that drive their engagement.

The third and final level of analysis involves a deeper exploration of how individuals view, engage with and interpret online violent extremist content. Recognising that different individuals in different conditions will interpret messages in accordance with their own social backgrounds, conceptual frameworks and world-views, this level of analysis involves qualitative audience ethnographic research.

Finally, the research framework adopts Weimann and von Knop's (2008) model in which they identify several stages of engagement with terroristic narratives online: each motivated by a different set of needs that are in turn gratified by online functions and content. The "Searching Phase" involves users looking for answers out of a particular interest or curiosity that leads them to visit extremist websites. The "Seduction Phase" sees users being introduced to extremist narratives as they continue to visit specific websites. In the "Captivation Phase" the users start to visit blogs, forums or chat rooms though they do not participate in their interactive features. In the "Persuasion Phase" users begin to participate in communicative exchanges as members of online communities. The final, "Operative Phase," occurs when users are introduced to the operational activities of the group and this may translate to real world activities.

### **Counter narratives to interrupt online radicalisation project**

As part of the CoVER program, researchers at Curtin University are exploring ways in which individuals engage with violent extremist content in order to develop understanding of how effective counter narratives can be constructed. Part of this research involves a discrete project in partner-

ship with Exit White Power- an Australian based NGO dedicated to tackling white supremacist and racist based ideologies. The project involves the collection of user responses to a set of discussion starters posted on a public discussion page on Facebook. The 'White Power? Discussion Page' is



moderated by Exit White Power and is primarily designed to encourage debate and discussion about racism. Over a period of three months (July- October 2014) 24 discussion starters were posted on the Discussion Page. Over the life of the project the page was advertised on Facebook, targeted at Australian men aged 14-25 and in particular to those engaging in discussions on race hate pages.

The aim of the project was to test the effectiveness of using both group identification (GI) and ideological beliefs (IB) messages in online counter narratives to white supremacy. Group identification factors include a variety of social and personal reasons that attract particular individuals to joining a white extremist group - for example a sense of belonging, as an outlet of rage or as a source of personal support. Ideological belief factors include adopting a theory that presents a simplified explanation of a complex world, that casts white people as superior and which turn hate and violence into virtues.

To research the responses elicited by GI and IB focussed counter narratives, the discussion starters alternated between addressing each of these factors. IB focussed messages questioned white supremacist theories on the basis of fact, debunking misinformation and suggesting alternative interpretations of current affairs issues, for example ““Asia for the Asians, Africa for the Africans, White countries for everybody”... Is it actually true that only white countries accept refugees and immigration?” GI focussed messages questioned whether involvement in white supremacy is desirable in personal terms, for example “What do you think it takes to become active in the White Nationalist movement? Would you have to make big changes to your life?”

All responses and comments during the life of the project were collated and formed a database that could then be analysed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do users engage with online discussion posts targeting ideological and lifestyle factors?
2. How can online forums/ discussion pages be used to develop counter narratives?

The findings of the analysis, along with findings from other research projects will be used to inform the understanding of effective online counter narratives along three dimensions:

- Discursive elements of a counter narrative that encourage response and participation in online counter narrative engagements - **Terminology**
- Narrative elements of a counter narrative that encourage response and participation in online counter narrative engagements - **Theme**
- Persuasive elements that enable counter narratives to effectively disrupt violent extremist messaging online - **Credibility**

## Preliminary Findings

While a comprehensive analysis of the White Power? Discussion Page data is yet to be completed, a preliminary analysis has already yielded some significant insights into the ways in which individuals engage with online violent extremist content in a discussion forum. Analytical data provided by Facebook Analytics shows that, during the life of the project, the page had an organic reach of 19529 and engaged 10266 users. There were 24323 visits to the page and a total of 3086 comments to the 24 Discussion Starters. The most commented upon discussion starter was “Describe the moment in your life when White Pride became important to you...” (IB). This starter was designed to encourage users to reflect on the ideological assumptions of race and their personal identification with ‘white power.’ The least commented on discussion starter asked users “How do you think being a vocal white nationalist affects your future prospects?” (GI). Overall

the IB focussed discussion starters attracted more comments than the GI starters, though this slight discrepancy could be attributed to a number of variables not necessarily relevant to the type of message. The discussion starters and number of likes and comments are summarised in Table 3 (see next page). Please note that these figures were tallied after moderation of comments that violate The Page’s Terms and Conditions of Use.

A qualitative content analysis of the comments was constructed around a grounded theory model, based on the one first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This model involved an initial reading of the data to code for as many categories as possible. The initial open coding of the data highlighted themes for further analysis. The salient themes from the analysis were then collated and integrated. The final stage of the coding process produced four thematic categories embedded in the user comments: survival/ preservation (of

the white race); victimhood (of a white genocide conspiracy); blaming the other and justification of beliefs.

A word frequency search generated through NVivo computer software revealed that the most commonly used words in the comments were “white” and “people.” Throughout the commentary ‘white people’ was the most salient identity marker for user in- group identification. Along with the results from the content analysis, this suggests that the functional needs served by the discussion page were related to personal identity and social integration, not information seeking. This is an important point as it underscores that the attraction of online use (both the consumption and production of content) is related to the personal and intergroup relations and not to information seeking. Further analysis of how the themes were narrated in page comments highlighted that the themes correlated to personal identity and

**TABLE 3:** Preliminary Findings

#	Discussion Starter	Type	Likes	Comments
1	Is multiculturalism the death of White Australia?	IB	74	149
2	Do you share your opinions about white nationalism with your friends and family? Do you get a hard time for what you believe?	GI	23	51
3	There’s a fair few passages in the Bible promoting violence against infidels (or non-believers) - so why are people more worried about similar quotes from the Qu’ran?	IB	36	149
4	Should white nationalists in Australia try to hold themselves to higher personal standards e.g. no drinking or drugs, not engaging in violence? Do white nationalists you know achieve this?	GI	30	136
5	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDAQ4zHiqvo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDAQ4zHiqvo</a> Did anybody catch this show? What do you make of his story?	GI	7	39
6	How often do you question what you read? How do you know which sources to trust?	GI	171	63

7	Rock music has its roots in Africa. Beer was first made in Ancient Egypt. The surfboard was first developed in Polynesia. The list goes on. Can we say that multiculturalism doesn't benefit us if some of our most cherished cultural icons first came from other, non-White countries?	IB	48	106
8	Do you think white nationalism has a good image in Australia? Is it something you can feel proud to be part of?	GI	136	222
9	Of the many people who have left white power groups, a decent amount used to be quite senior within them. Also interesting is that since leaving, these very people said that they see the error of their beliefs, and that they only joined because of things missing in their personal lives. How much confidence does that give you about the leaders in these organisations and whether they actually believe what they're telling you?	GI	43	59
10	How do you think being a vocal white nationalist affects your future prospects?	GI	10	15
11	Statistically speaking most Australians don't support white nationalism, why do you think this is?	GI	65	133
12	Some of you have said 'I wasn't racist until someone was racist to me' - if this describes you, why do you choose to fight fire with fire? What's the difference between self-defence and vilification?	GI	36	64
13	One thing we're hearing about a lot from you guys is frustration that you can't be proud to be White - in an ideal world, how would you actually express this pride?	GI	38	95
14	There doesn't seem to be any consensus over what it means to be White - what does being White meant to you?	IB	45	251
15	Why would you join a White Nationalist movement in the first place? What do you think you would get out of it?	GI	76	127
16	On August 5, 2012, Hammerskin member, Wade Michael Page opened fire in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, in an attack that killed six and wounding four before shooting himself after being wounded by police. Does this man represent you or does he represent an extreme fringe? How does this event make you feel about the movement?	IB	70	145
17	Some of you have spoken about a "white genocide" occurring in the world today. What credible evidence is out there that such a thing is even happening?	IB	41	162
18	Do you see yourself as racist? If not, what do you see the difference as being?	IB	72	159

19	What do you think it takes to become active in the White Nationalist movement? Would you have to make big changes to your life?	GI	55	72
20	Recently flyers in Bondi asked people to take a stand against Jews, whilst last week a video posted on an ADL page warned of another Cronulla, and that mosques were going to burn. Do these groups share the same cause? Or is the campaign against Jews different to the one against Muslims?	IB	96	204
21	To those of you who have shared your views on this forum, thanks for being involved in the discussions- it takes guts to speak up for your beliefs and we hope you continue to do so. To those that read our page but dismiss our questions as "stupid" or "irrelevant", we're curious; what brings you here if you're not happy to back up your claims with facts and debate?	GI	37	37
22	"Asia for the Asians, Africa for the Africans, White countries for everybody"...Is it actually true that only white countries accept refugees and immigration?	IB	202	199
23	Describe the moment in your life when White Pride became important to you.	IB	92	260
24	If you're one of those people that think there's a white genocide going on, why don't other "white people" seem to know or care about it? Or if when they hear about it, why do you think they are so dismissive of it?	IB	39	189

intergroup relations functions. Survival and victimhood narratives served to reinforce in group favouritism, blaming the other functioned to support moral superiority.

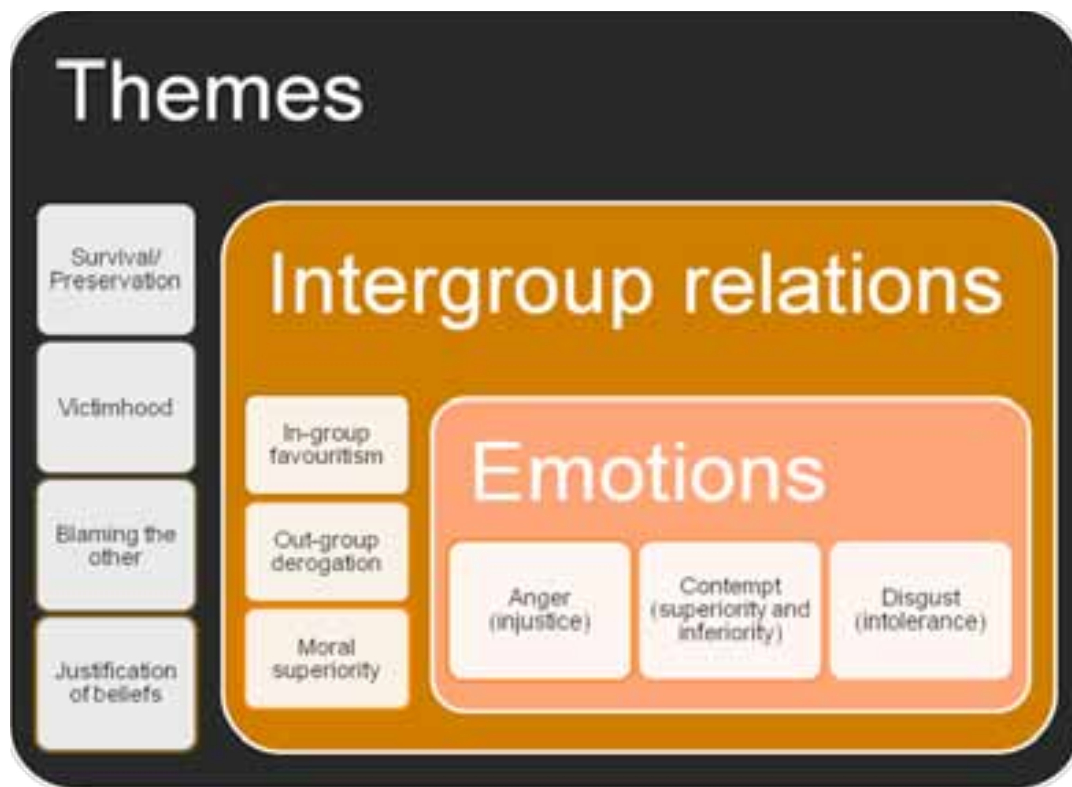
A final analysis applying Frank, Matsumoto, & Hwang (2014) ANCODI hypothesis will add to the findings. The ANCODI hypothesis posits that

anger, contempt and disgust are an emotional mix indicative of intergroup political aggression. By coding the emotive language expressed in the comments and correlating this to intergroup relations and the themes, a more comprehensive understanding of how users engage online with violent extremist narratives and how they can also be engaged in counter violent extremist narratives.

**Conclusions**

The project reported here is part of an ongoing research program into online violent extremism with a focus on exploring the structural relations between violent extremist online content and user engagement with violent extremist narratives. The project tested how users who already demonstrated some propensity to engage in white power online narratives would interact with discussion starters that questioned group identity and ideological belief factors associated with right wing nationalist movements.

The analysis of the page comments highlights several points for developing understanding of online engagement with violent extremism. Firstly, the profiles of those who regularly engaged with discussions



**FIGURE 2:** Online Indicators of Engagement with Violent Extremist Narratives

confirm that they were already engaging with white power narratives. According to Weimann and von Knop’s (2008) model of the stages of engagement with online terroristic narratives, the seduction phase occurs when users are introduced to extremist narratives and continue to be exposed to these narratives by visiting specific websites that reinforce the particular extremist beliefs. The captivation phase sees users start to visit interactive websites such as forums, blogs or chat rooms though they do not participate by posting comments or taking part in discussions (they may however respond to comments through benign actions such as ‘liking’). The persuasion phase marks participation in communicative exchanges as the user identifies as a member of an online community of like-minded individuals. While it is not possible to make any conclusions about the overall visitors to the page, the content analysis of the comments confirms that the page attracted participation from users who self-identified as “white nationalists,” “patriots,” and “right wing.” This suggests that the discussion page attracted users in the persuasion phase and possibly also the seduction and captivation phases though considering the overall number of page visits.

There was no discernible difference in the tone or language of responses to either group identification focussed or ideological belief focussed discussion starters. Those who commented tended to use the discussion page as a forum for reinforcing their world views as revealed by the salient themes of the page commentary: survival, victimhood, blaming the other and justification of beliefs. This indicates that the primary functions of the discussion page, in terms of Media Uses and Gratifications Theory, were personal identity and social integration. Users participated in the discussion page as a way of reinforcing intergroup relations: in group favouritism, out group derogation and moral superiority. They did not use the discussion page for other forms of communication and interaction such as sharing information, interests or for entertainment.

While a comprehensive analysis of the project is yet to be undertaken, the preliminary findings point to some valuable lessons that can be directed towards developing more effective online counter narratives. Importantly, the personal identity and social integration function of media should be the foundation for the development of counter narratives that seek to re-engage individuals and interrupt online radicalisation. Providing facts or information that challenges the assumptions of an extremist ideology did not prove effective in engaging users who already self-identify with these ideologies. Rather, consideration should be given to inter group relations and how these relations are expressed through violent extremist narratives.



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## Countering the Terrorist Narrative: Issues and challenges in contesting such spaces

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President Obama in his address to the United Nations in September 2014, spoke on the need for “contesting the space that terrorists occupy.” He went on to further elaborate that the narrative and ideology of groups such as ISIL and *Al Qaeda and Boko Haram* would “wilt and die” if it was “consistently exposed and confronted and refuted...” (Obama, 2014).

How then do we in practical terms, confront and subsequently contest the “space” that terrorists occupy? Perhaps, we can start by acknowledging that we are in fact facing a grave and challenging threat. In May 2015, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned that the flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) to Islamic State and other extremist groups had increased alarmingly: 15,000 fighters from 80 countries in November 2014 to 25,000 fighters from 100 countries in mid-2015 (UN News Centre, 2015). This translates to a staggering increase of approximately 70%. Let us be clear: dethroning an existing idea and in many ways challenging the status-quo (for in such radical circles, fighting in Syria and Iraq is seen as the *accepted* norm), while addressing the issues they raise by providing an alternative that is workable, sustainable and practical will be extremely daunting. It nevertheless has to be done, if we want to see credible progress made in defeating the terrorist in general and countering their narrative in particular.

### The Message

#### What are they saying?

Schmid and de Graaf (1982) argue convincingly that while terrorism in the past was only seen through the lenses of political violence, there is now a need for it to be understood in the context of “communication and propaganda”. Schmid posits that terrorism is a “combination of both violence and propaganda” to “advertise” and convince others on the groups potential to cause “harm and to destroy” (Schmid, 2005, p. 127-136). This propaganda that is then communicated forms the basis of the terrorist narrative.

#### What then is a narrative?

George Dimitriu notes that a narrative can be defined as a “resource for political actors to con-

struct a shared meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behavior of the public” (Dimitriu, 2013, p. 13). This is the framework through which “[a] shared sense is achieved, representing a past, present and future, an obstacle and a desired endpoint” (Dimitriu, 2013). Corman (2011) points out that “narratives are powerful resources for influencing target audiences; they offer an alternative form of rationality deeply rooted in culture, which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action” (Corman, p. 36).

Given this, there is an urgent need on the part of the practitioners to understand the message of the

terrorists. What is the story-line that they are telling to attract, engage, radicalize and subsequently recruit people? Based on my previous research (Samuel, 2012), I would like to postulate that the main rhetoric of the terrorist comprises a simple three-step progression, which is as follows:

1. There are injustices occurring in many parts of the world;
2. There is a need to act; and
3. Violence is the only possible response.

These straightforward assumptions appeal to those looking for simple answers to complex questions and has the added advantage of being partially true. It is firstly reiterated and reinforced that there are tremendous acts of injustice, cruelty and discrimination, causing incredible misery, suffering and anguish to numerous innocent people all around the world, simply because of the race, religion, belief or creed they profess. According to Roy Rodgers from University Malaya, terrorists are most adept at exploiting and manipulating such grievances, legitimate or otherwise. Reports, images and life-witness accounts are all skillfully manipulated to showcase worldwide suffering, and it is subsequently conveyed by the terrorists to any interested individual through any available means.

It is in this context that two questions are formed:

1. After seeing and witnessing all that is happening (suffering, humiliation and cruelty against targeted groups), can you choose to do nothing?
2. What then will your response be to this tragedy?

### **How do they present their message?**

The strength of the message to convince and make an impact also lies in the manner in which it is related and conveyed. It is therefore important for us to identify the tools and/or the methodology that the terrorists use to convey their message. Is it a gradual one-to-one friendship/mentorship

tailor-made process that is crafted to suit the personality and the environment of the individual that they seek to radicalize? Is it a generic on-line media programme that is designed to attract the general attention of individuals, by showcasing the injustice and persecution followed by the suffering and humiliation faced by the victims? Or is it a combination of methods, whereby the on-line media is used to attract those who are curious or interested, and their progress is later monitored and facilitated by vis-à-vis interaction?

As mentioned, closely connected to the process in which the message is presented, are the tools and channels through which the message is showcased. Is the social media the main conduit and how exactly does it reach and influence? Or is the narrative carried out via religious messages in religious institutions, or even traditional means of communications such as books or radio/television broadcasts? Does what happen on-line reflect what is actually taking place off-line? The above issues need to be carefully considered to better understand the ability of the terrorists to be effective in their messaging.

### **Secondary Trauma**

Related to the process on how they present their material, is the skillful use of the terrorist narrative to exploit secondary trauma. The phenomenon of 'secondary trauma' is defined as a set of symptoms that parallel those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which include hyperarousal symptoms such as feeling tense and/or having angry outbursts (Bober & Regehr, 2005; "What are the symptoms?," n.d.). These sets of emotions could happen when an individual associates himself with victims of violence, through direct or indirect means, and as a result, over a period of time, identifies and feels the suffering and pain of the victim as his own. The Fort Hood incident, in which a US Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan killed 12 people, was said to have possibly been caused by a secondary trauma (McGirk, 2009). What is of significance is the manner in which secondary trauma has been the cause

of violent conduct. No longer does an individual have to be in direct contact or close association with a victim before he or she feels their pain. With this approach, individuals who are otherwise in stable and peaceful environments might nevertheless be severely affected through an “ideological inducement” (Rommel Banlaoi, personal communication, 23 February 2010). Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf, a former terrorist now based in Semarang, relates how he was introduced to videos and reading materials about the suffering of Muslims at the age of 17 by his teachers (Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf, personal communication, 5 April 2011).

It is in this regard that we see how the terrorist recruiter has focused the narrative, and has been able to connect the individual to the perceived injustice of the aggrieved party. By cleverly manipulating the Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution, in tandem with the globalisation phenomenon, terrorists have been very successful in ensuring that pain, anguish and misery happening in distant lands and even in different times, have been brought into the lives of the people, vividly and graphically, by the media in general and the internet in particular (Samuel, 2012). Through blogs, chatrooms and the YouTube, perceived or real injustices happening all around the world have been condensed, edited, packaged and delivered to arouse a variety of feelings and emotions with the express purpose of eliciting sympathy, “igniting the flame” (Rommel Banlaoi, personal communication, 23 February 2010) or even encouraging active participation in violent action. This was seen in the case of a 22-year old British undergraduate who was shown videos of Muslims allegedly ‘suffering because of the West’, which led her to be radicalised, wanting to be the first female British suicide bomber in order to make “the Western world listen” (Talwar, 2010). In a study of young Guantanamo Bay detainees, many indicated the extensive use by their recruiters of visual displays and films of suffering women and children in refugee camps in Chechnya, Palestine and Afghanistan (Curcio, 2005). Nasir

Abas, a former key member of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), notes how his teachers used to distribute reading materials and show videos of Muslims suffering in Afghanistan and Palestine (Nasir Abas, personal communication, 7 April 2011). Harry Setyo R., a former Indonesian terrorist, recounted from his experience how instructors used videos, reading material and lectures on issues in Palestine and Ambon to indoctrinate young recruits (Harry Setyo R., personal communication, 5 April 2011). Noor Umug from the Philippines, highlights how teachers in certain religious schools in the Southern Philippines actively include reading materials and videos of suffering Muslims in Palestine, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries. These visual stimuli were used by terrorists to generate anger as the seed for future violent conduct.

### **Why does it strike a chord?**

Why does the message brought about by the terrorists gain acceptance? What is in their message that has the tremendous ability to bypass moral and ethical considerations, and subsequently challenge the notion that all life is sacred and wanton murder of the innocent is abhorrent? What and how does any part of their story compel an individual to not only risk punitive action from the state, but also the possibility of losing their lives to engage in acts deemed as terrorism?

It might be worthwhile to listen to what former terrorists have to say with regards to what triggered and drove their actions. Harry Setyo R., the former terrorist in Indonesia, relates from his own experience how the terrorist recruiters would draw the potential recruit’s attention to the plight of suffering Muslims, and subsequently question them on their response to such tragedies (Harry Setyo R., personal communication, 5 April 2011). Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf highlights how as a young man he felt compelled to defend his fellow Muslims, whom he perceived as suffering, wherever they were, after being exposed to the rhetoric of the terrorists. Sydney Jones reiterates that in the Indonesian case, the premise that “this is the way

that you can actively help your fellow Muslims,” functions as a strong and effective recruiting strategy for the terrorists.

The importance of the narrative is perhaps what led Frank Ciluffo to declare, “We’ve been fighting the wrong battle. The real centre of gravity of the enemy is their narrative” (Ripley, 2008).

### The Counter-Narrative

Counter-narratives, according to a study conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) “attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly through a range of online and offline means,” and are aimed at “individuals, groups and networks further along the path to radicalisation, whether they be sympathizers, passive supporters or those more active within extremist movements” (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 6).

Only when we understand the message, do we have the chance to effectively develop and craft a counter-message that has the potential to engage the story of the terrorist. This counter-narrative has to be able to firstly, debunk and negate the claims of the terrorists and secondly, to provide alternative mechanisms to address the issues raised by the terrorists. Professor Bilveer Singh from the National University of Singapore (NUS) is of the opinion that if an effective counter-narrative programme is not in place, there will be problems at a later stage (Bilveer Singh, personal correspondence, 10 March 2011). This point was further reiterated by Noor Huda Ismail, who has interviewed hundreds of former terrorists both as a scholar and a journalist and based on his experience in running various innovative counter-radicalisation programmes in Indonesia (Noor Huda Ismail, personal correspondence, 5 April 2011). Furthermore, Sir David Omand, the former director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) noted in 2005 that “[we] badly need a counter-narrative that will help groups exposed to the terrorist message make sense of what they are

seeing around them” (Furedi, 2007, p. 87). Given this development, what then are the issues that we need to consider when formulating a counter-narrative?

### Debunk and Negate

Debunking and negating really go to the core of contesting the arguments, rhetoric and propaganda of the terrorist narrative. In order to do so, one should highlight the questionable achievements of the terrorists in terms of analyzing what are their objectives, what have they done and what have they achieved. This can be done in three (3) steps. First, the terrorists groups have a political or ideological agenda such as liberation of a certain people-group from foreign invaders, the end of discrimination, the need for justice and equality etc. Second, we compare these objectives with the actions that have been taken by the terrorists (i.e. indiscriminate bombings, beheadings of prisoners, killing of civilians through suicide attacks) and third, we analyse if any of their actions have indeed helped them achieve their objectives. While this method seems simplistic, it has, in the author’s experience, when presenting this as a counter-narrative, opened up the space to question the effectiveness of the terrorist method. Alex Schmid notes that the “actual record of behavior” in the case of al Qaeda, “is very much vulnerable when their lofty professions are measured against their actual performances” (Schmid, 2014, p. 15.). Indeed, there is hard evidence that suggests that more than 80% of the victims of al Qaeda have been Muslims (Wright, 2012). And, in many cases, the narratives of the terrorists themselves are rejected by the very Muslims they claim to be fighting for (Zelin, 2013).

The purpose here is to show that at best, the violence perpetrated by terrorists are tactically inferior strategy and at worst, terrorists are actually aware of this but have their own vested interests. All of which has had very little to do with their stated objectives and instead caused tremendous harm and misery to the very people they claim to be fighting for. At this particular juncture, it might

be significant to note that many of those who are mouthing the narrative of the terrorists are basically repeating what others are saying without giving much thought to the reliability and accuracy of their words. This ‘echo chamber’ effect might give the perception, that what is being said must be true given the number of people saying the same thing. Hence, there is a need to break this effect by challenging the ideas and perceptions often times readily accepted without question.

It is of utmost importance that efforts are undertaken to obtain the right people to debunk and negate the terrorist narrative. Essentially, we need messengers who are credible and have the ability to connect to the audience. Former terrorists who have been rehabilitated and victims of terrorism offer a powerful story that could be harnessed in countering the terrorist narrative. In the case of former terrorists, they are said to have the credibility or the “street credentials” and “carry a certain weight in terms of the respect that potential recruits might have towards them” (Zeiger, 2014). Victims, by virtue over what has happened to them, provide a “powerful emotional narrative” that has the potential to “reinforce dissatisfaction” over the method and the approach taken by the terrorist (Zeiger). Their story also has the potential to counter the often times evocative premise that the terrorists are representing and fighting for a victimized group of people. As highlighted by Schmid, “victim and survivor voices need not only be heard, but ought to be amplified” (Schmid, 2014).

### **Retell the Story**

While it is essential to challenge and debunk the arguments put forth by the terrorists, there is perhaps also the need to take proactive measures in “retelling the story” (Kumar Ramakrishna, personal correspondence, 23 July 2015). For far too long terrorists have been able to manipulate religion and twist it to suite their own agenda and objectives. We need to “retell the story” and take back the stage in presenting religion to the masses. The compassionate, merciful and just sides of reli-

gion has often been deliberately and methodically pushed aside by the terrorists and all that is left is a skewed and incorrect interpretation. For example, crafting stories that depict the golden age of Islam, the scientific and social advances that Islam gave the world would show at least two things. Firstly, that there was such a period in Islam and secondly how far and remote that era is when compared to the current one we see propagated by IS and other such groups. Retelling the story would also include highlighting religious modern-day heroes who have defied the terrorist call of violence and yet been able to address grievances and resolve problems and conflicts through creative non-violent means.

### **Problems and Challenges**

It must however be noted that the strategy of bringing awareness to those susceptible to terrorist radicalization, is based on the assumption that having once known the actual facts regarding the damage caused by the terrorists and the futility in terms of achieving strategic objectives, there will be a dawning of realization that joining or sympathizing with terrorists is not a logical or a rational thing to do. The second assumption is that these potential terrorist recruits will then make calculated, rational choices.

Can awareness in the form of a counter-narrative lead those who have already decided who the enemy is and the rewards of destroying such an enemy make a difference? Here, there is a need, as mentioned earlier, for reliable messengers. Unfortunately, often times, the counter narrative is formulated and disseminated by what is perceived to be the ‘enemy.’ This at times could mean that the message is not given sufficient reflection, regardless of how well it is crafted, due to perceived source of the narrative. Given this, greater effort must go into developing home-grown, indigenous efforts in formulating counter-narratives. Similarly, counter-narratives that focus on youth that are top-down and paternalistic can be seen as condescending and will not have the desired effects. Therefore, training credible, home-grown

messengers is of utmost importance.

Finally, there might be a need to actually reassess our actions to see if inadvertently we are the reason for the narrative of the terrorist to begin with. We need to entertain the possibility that at times our actions could be legitimate grievances, capitalized by terrorists for their evil, ulterior motives, to carry out indiscriminate violence. The Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS) in its report entitled *Countering Violent Ex-*

*tremism: The Counter Narrative Study* pointed out the need for “dealing with local and regional issues” as “the starting point for countering the narratives of violence” (Qatar International Academy for Security Studies, 2013, p. 192). Often times, these local and regional issues stem from double standards between what we say and what we actually do. Hence, the need to close the “say-do” gap (Fink & Barclay, 2013). As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it so succinctly, “What you do speaks so loudly, that I cannot hear what you say” (Emerson, 1876).

## Conclusion

Hillary R. Clinton, the former American Foreign Secretary, candidly noted in 2011 during a Senate Testimony, that “we are in an information war, and we are losing” (Pizutto, 2013). Until and unless we rethink our strategy on countering the narrative of the terrorists, we may not only lose the information war, but the war itself.

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## **PART III**

Disengagement, Deradicalization and  
Reintegration of Former Violent Extremists



## Testing the Notion that Prisons are Schools for Terrorism: Examining radicalization and disengagement in the Philippine corrective system

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**KEYWORDS:** *de-radicalization, incarceration, prison radicalization, violent extremism, terrorism*

This paper gives a brief overview of my research in the Philippines, which seeks to address the best ways to incarcerate terrorist offenders. There is still much conjecture about how governments should incarcerate terrorist offenders. Should terrorist offenders be segregated together, or even isolated away from other inmates to prevent prison radicalisation, or should they be dispersed into the general prison population with minimal risk? So far, strategies for housing terrorist inmates remain inconsistent in many countries and there have been very few empirical studies undertaken to determine the most effective way to house them.

In Australia, the fear that mainstream prisoners will be radicalised by terrorist inmates has been a key reason for national security and corrections policies to segregate and isolate ‘high-risk’ terrorist inmates from other prisoners (Jones, 2014). In New South Wales, for example, terrorist inmates are housed in expensive purpose-built ‘supermax’ facilities, which segregate high-risk offenders (Carlton, 2008). The UK takes a different approach and is reluctant to separate terrorist inmates from other prisoners following their experience with Irish Republican Army (IRA) inmates in the 1970s. The UK’s early segregation policy proved counter-productive as the confinement of IRA inmates together in large numbers “engendered powerful social pressures” to conform and remain committed to the group (Silke, 2011, p. 125).

The assumptions about prison radicalisation appear to be based on a limited number of high-profile cases like Richard Reid, Kevin James, Levar Washington and Jose Padilla, all of whom are alleged to have become Islamic radicals in prison. Not only are these cases offered as evidence of the dangers of prison radicalisation (that is when terrorist inmates are mixed with other prisoners), they also seem to provide justification for countries, such as the USA and Australia, to develop special segregation policies (Jones, 2014). The common rationale behind these policies is that incarcerating terrorists leads to the entrenchment of their beliefs, new recruits, and more sophisticated terrorist acts upon release (Rappaport et. al., 2012). Just as prisons are frequently referred to as “schools for crime”, several commentators (Cilluffo et. al., 2007; Hannah et al., 2008) maintain similar perspectives about prisons being schools for terrorists. Cuthbertson (2004) also raises the concern that prisons bring together terrorists with hardened criminals, producing an even greater threat. Such fears mimic conventional penological concerns about mixing younger with older prisoners and career criminals with first offenders.

My research draws on penology to compare the beliefs and behaviour of terrorist offenders incarcerated in two contrasting prisons in the Philippines: one that *integrates* terrorist inmates into the general prison population, and the other *segregates* them from the mainstream prisoners. With this contrast in mind, I address the following questions. Do the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958) and certain prison environments act to inhibit or encourage the radicalisation of mainstream prisoners by

terrorist inmates?<sup>1</sup> Do different prison regimes and their methods of incarceration, such as integration or segregation, contribute to changes in beliefs and behaviour in terrorist inmates? Does a terrorist offender's offence history (or absence of prior offences) have a bearing on how they adapt to prison culture and environment? In answering these questions, I also consider the Philippine's unique cultural and religious characteristics (e.g. a Catholic majority in Philippine prisons) as these have a bearing on the nature of prison regime, environment, and inmate culture. They may also impact on the risk of prison radicalisation and/or the potential for success in intervention efforts (Jones & Morales, 2012).

## Background & Justification

Along with Indonesia, the southern Philippines has been one of the main sites of terrorist activity in the Southeast Asian region. Almost 300 civilians have been killed in terrorist attacks in Indonesia since 2000 and an even greater number of fatalities have occurred in the Philippines, where there have been more than 400 deaths from bomb attacks since 2001. Traditionally there have been strong linkages between terrorists in both countries. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Indonesia's most significant terrorist organisation, had its main training base in Mindanao from 1994 until 2000 and several hundred Indonesian jihadists have trained and sometimes fought alongside their Filipino counterparts. Relations between JI and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) have been especially strong and endure to the present. These groups are well represented in the Philippine corrective system.

The U.S. State Department continues to assess the southern Philippines (the Sulu archipelago and the island of Mindanao) as a "safe haven for terrorists," particularly because the Philippine government still has little control in this region (U.S. State Department, 2013). There are several active jihadist groups that pose a threat to Australian civilians and interests in the region. One of the ASG's more recent kidnapping victims was an Australian citizen, Warren Rodwell, who was taken from his home in Mindanao in December 2011 and released safely after 15 months in captivity.

The ASG, which has the highest representation in Philippine prisons, poses a significant security threat. The group has been linked to hundreds of kidnappings and murders.

As counter-terrorism operations continue to prevail against these jihadist groups, the number of individuals held in custody for terrorism is growing and have been bolstered by transfers of terrorists from jails overseas. The Philippines government is also concerned that terrorist prisoners will use their prison time to radicalise others, recruit, and on release commit further acts of terrorism. The lack of properly designed and resourced programs to manage terrorist offenders is likely to result in high recidivism and a continuing terrorist threat, although very few terrorist inmates are due for release in the near future.

My research is being undertaken in New Bilibid Prison (NBP) and Metro Manila District Jail (MMDJ), which are the main correctional facilities in the Philippines where the majority of terrorist inmates are held. NBP is the largest correctional facility with a maximum security prison population of about 14,200. As a means of managing such a large number, new inmates are assigned among twelve 'gangs' that have self-formed over time as a result of the weak prison regime. These gangs vary in size, the largest coming from the criminal milieu of metro-Manila. Terrorist offenders are not obliged to join a gang; however,

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, the term 'terrorist inmate' denotes those individuals incarcerated, whether on remand or convicted, for a range of offences associated with terrorism. This research focuses on Muslim terrorists as they constitute almost all the terrorist detainees in the Philippines. The study recognises that the term terrorist is problematic and that many 'terrorist' inmates may be better described as jihadists, in that they believe Islam allows the use of violence under certain circumstances but not the indiscriminate killing of civilians through actions such as bombings in public places. In the Philippines, many Abu Sayyaf Group members, for example, are incarcerated for criminal offences but may not have been involved with political violence.

gang pressure usually results in terrorist offenders joining a gang. Gang membership provides inmates with a sense of order and discipline, protection, kinship and a means of income. The gang leadership also provides a system of supervision and reporting troublesome inmates, and also provides a monitoring system where they can report clandestine meetings or suspicious activities.

The prison currently holds 44 terrorists who are dispersed amongst the gangs. MMDJ is a much smaller facility but currently holds 496 alleged terrorist offenders. These are concentrated and segregated away from other prisoners in two separate sections called the Special Intensive Care Areas (SICA 1 and SICA 2). At present SICA 1 holds 224 terrorist offenders and SICA holds 272.<sup>2</sup> There are no gangs in either area.

### Key Research Objectives

In order to test the assumption that prisons are breeding grounds for terrorists, my research has two key objectives.

1. *To examine if terrorist inmates who are integrated into the prison population exhibit a greater degree of 'prisonisation' (i.e. adjustment to imprisonment) than when incarcerated with fellow terrorists and segregated from other inmates.*

Based on Clemmer's (1958) theory of "prisonisation," I am testing two different methods of incarceration for high risk groups - integration and segregation - to determine their impact on terrorist inmates' beliefs and behaviours. Clemmer describes the changes inmates undergo during their imprisonment as functional or pragmatic adaptations to the dangers of prison. Over time inmates assimilate the customs of the prison and adopt the behaviour and norms of the inmates' (oppositional) culture, particularly the gang sub-cultures, associated with that institution. This adjustment or functional process he termed prisonisation, which was attributed to long periods of

incarceration and a loss of contact with the outside world. At worst, prisonisation leads to learned helplessness and an inability to return to normal life. The degree of prisonisation is influenced by several factors such as the inmate's personality, criminal background, social relationships and acceptance or rejection of the prison code.

With Clemmer's work in mind, I am examining the following hypotheses: (a) when terrorist inmates are dispersed and *integrated* into the general prison population, they are likely to adopt the norms and beliefs of the various gang sub-cultures, which inhibits them radicalising other inmates and encourages them to disengage from their militant pasts; and (b) when terrorist inmates are *segregated* from the general prison population and are incarcerated together they are unlikely to adopt other patterns of behaviour or beliefs, thereby retaining, and possibly even exacerbating their militant values.

2. *To examine whether a terrorist inmate's offence history (or absence of prior offending) has a bearing on how they adapt to inmate culture and the prison environment.*

Thus, I am testing whether terrorist inmates who have a history of criminal offending adapt more readily to gang sub-cultures than those with no criminal record, or only a history of violent jihad (cf. Wolfgang, 1961). Stander, Farrington, Hill & Altham (1989, p. 325) (Note that prisoners tend to specialise in certain types of offences, so a terrorists' past offences may be indicative of future offending patterns). As there are a variety of offences committed by individuals labelled as "terrorist inmates," I hypothesise that adjustment to imprisonment will also vary among these inmates when integrated into prison. I eventually aim to develop an adaptation index for terrorist inmates that can be used to better guide interventions efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Figures are taken from personal communication with Philippine correctional officials on 21 November 2014.

## Research Significance and Innovation

Relatively few counter-terrorism policies apply penological theory and research to improve the way terrorist inmates are managed. Because of the lack of evidence-led policies, the default practice has been to assign all terrorist inmates to the highest levels of prison security (i.e. above probable risk), resulting in expensive, counter-productive and harsh incarceration conditions. My research is unique because it provides relevant evidence-based research for pressing decisions about how best to house incarcerated terrorists. Currently, there are few studies informed by penological theory that examine radicalisation, disengagement and de-radicalisation,<sup>3</sup> particularly how the prison experience influences terrorist beliefs and behaviour.

My approach is informed by the need to tailor intervention programs to be sensitive to place and circumstances. There is no single “off the shelf” intervention model and it remains unclear which aspects of current programs successfully lead a militant to disengage from terrorism, de-radicalise, and remain so after release. Informed opinion suggests that interventions should be uniquely tailored to the specific conditions of a country where the program is being conducted (International Crisis Group, 2007). My research will eventually contribute to the development of evidence-based correctional policies in the Philippines relevant to terrorist offenders by taking into account the role of individual adaptation to the prison environment and its different regimes and settings.

I also contribute to both penological and counter-terrorism literature by including findings about whether the prison environment, and more specifically inmate culture, impacts on terrorist inmates and their jihadist ideologies when integrated into a general prison population. In addition to Clemmer, 1958; Wolfgang, 1961; and Stander et. al., 1989), several other scholars have examined the

effects on inmates arising from the limits and deprivation of imprisonment (Sykes, 1956; Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961). Sykes (1958) suggests that inmate behaviour stems from the pains of imprisonment and upon entering prisons inmates are stripped (ritual degradation) of their outside identity and influences while confined to small congested spaces with limited resources to support them. Therefore, prisons produce their own unique and extreme responses that force changes in attitudes and behaviours. Irwin and Cressey (1962) suggest that individuals also bring patterns of behaviour with them when they enter prison. More recent studies note several environmental influences on inmates from both the informal structure of the prison, such as an inmate’s criminal orientation (e.g. the importation of outside gang culture) (Camp & Gaes, 2005), and the formal organisation of the prison, such as the effects of the prison regime and guards (Sparks et al., 1996).

I have started with a functionalist approach to the impact of imprisonment but recognise that both the duration and forms of incarceration will influence the way terrorist inmates adapt to the prison subcultures encountered (Alpert, 1979). I note Hawkins’s (1976) criticism of prisonisation theory’s failure to explain individual/group variations in the expression of inmate culture and for assuming that the oppositional character of inmate society explains the rigid uniformity of behaviour (both guard and inmate). I assume, however, that different methods of incarceration affect individuals in varying (good or bad) ways and these effects may persist, at least for a short time on release (Walker, 1983). Thus, it is possible for inmates not previously radicalised to be radicalised, or for radicalised inmates to remain or intensify radicalisation or for radicalised inmates to disengage or qualify their outlook while in prison. However, there is limited empirical research about what occurs when radical inmates are incarcerated under different prison regimes that vary their exposure to the mainstream inmate population and/or to

<sup>3</sup> Radicalisation is defined as a change in beliefs, feelings and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the in-group (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Disengagement is defined as a behavioural change, such as refraining from violence and leaving a group or changing one’s role within it (Rabasa et al 2010). De-radicalisation is defined as an ideological or cognitive shift, such as a fundamental change in understanding that moderates one’s beliefs (Ashour 2009).

the other radical prisoners.

By applying penological studies to the field of prison radicalisation, I have begun to provide the foundation for cross-disciplinary research that is needed to understand the impact of prison (or not) on ideologically motivated prisoners. In contrast to the common view - that prisons are “schools for crime” - my study hypothesises that some prisons (not all) may play a positive role in the rehabilitation of a terrorist by serving as a passive (or general) intervention by reducing adherence to militancy. Importantly, I draw on Horgan’s work (2009) which proposes that prisons disrupt an individual’s crimogenic/terrorist milieu by providing respite that can lead to significant personal change. Hunt et al. (1993, p. 398) suggests that in prison “prior loyalties, allegiances and friendships” are disrupted. Inmates cope by creating new relationships and bond or group with like-minded prisoners, establishing new patterns of social interaction (Caldwell, 1956). So in this alternative view, the imprisonment of a terrorist may mark the beginning of physical disengagement and even the psychological de-radicalisation of some.

The current focus of research in this field addresses two main concerns: the causes of radicalisation, and the effectiveness of intervention programs (e.g., Noricks, 2009; Rabasa, et al., 2010; Morris, et. al., 2010). Understanding the causes of radicalisation (e.g. factors including inter-personal relationships and networks, and a sense of community or belonging, victimisation of self or loved ones; see Morris, et al., 2010) is important for this study because, as Noricks (2009) observes, some of these factors also play a role in an inmate’s disengagement and eventual de-radicalisation. Crenshaw (1981, p. 381) was one early writer to examine the causes or ‘preconditions’ of terrorism. She separates these into ‘permissive’ and ‘precipitant’ factors. Permissive factors are the more long-term macro causes, including economic and social disadvantage, that help create the group identification/solidarity process that assists radicalisation. Precipitant factors are an event that may trigger a

change in behaviour towards the use of violence. The permissive factors may be particularly relevant because the prison environment and its associated inmate culture will eventually result in terrorist inmates developing new social groups and networks over the life of their sentence. It is this aspect, prison social dynamics, which has often been overlooked or under-estimated in studies of de-radicalisation that we seek to explore.

## Methodology

There is very limited published descriptive information about the correctional system in Philippines. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the settings in which my research is undertaken has been critical to understand how terrorist offenders are incarcerated there. In addition to earlier site visits, a review of the laws, operation, customs and problems of the prison system augmented by further field visits to prisons and jails has been undertaken. The sensitivity and complexity of the qualitative research required for my study, combined with the relatively small numbers of voluntary participants to date, has restricted the collection of data for explicitly quantitative research aims, such as getting large enough samples for post-hoc statistical measures of differences across prisons and other co-variables such as prior offending. Nevertheless, the scale of data collection allowed supplementary statistical methods to be used for analysis as well as data from semi-structured conversational interviews across the two correctional facilities.

I am also using a conventional subject-case method informed by data collected about the inmate’s personal and historical background from the available prison and related case/offence records for *all* eligible inmates. Where present, prison administrative records have also been used to code, amongst others, prison infraction/disciplinary charges, medical/mental health status, gang affiliation and role, gang tattoos, age, religious observance, marital status and length of sentence. Case data was/is augmented by face-to-face interviews of a

representative sample of ‘terrorist’ offenders in each facility. Interviews also sought to address missing data from recorded case data and explore with inmates questions of adjustment to prison and attitudes and beliefs toward extremism.

Interviews have been conversational to help assess the self-reported impact of prison on inmates and their beliefs. I have focused on the possible role of ‘prisonisation’ or adaptation and so have far *repeated* the interviews 12-18 months after the initial interviews in order to assess changes in adaptation style and beliefs should that occurred. Thus, I attempt a simple panel study as a means of observing change over time. The *panel study* examines the extent to which terrorist inmates may disengage from radical extremism during the course of their sentence. I have also attempted to observe the changes experienced by inmates as a result of the impact of the prison environment. I am also measuring both the changes in attitudes towards militancy and the changes in attachment to their social group/gang relative to their length of exposure to prison.

As terrorist offenders are incarcerated differently in the Philippines - inmates in NBP are *integrated* or incarcerated with prison gangs, but in MMDJ they are *segregated* or incarcerated together away from the direct influence of other prison sub-cultures - these different situations allow me to observe any disparities in attachment to militancy and changes over time in adaptation to imprisonment among the two groups. Inmates in MMDJ (SICA 1& 2) have been expected to show less change over the period of incarceration as *segregation* may reinforce rather than dissipate attachment to group values.

So far there has been a general reluctance to participate in repeat interviews. Therefore, non-cash incentives (as approved by the prison authorities and in accord with ethical research guidelines) such as food hampers have been used. As the sharing food is an integral part of Filipino culture, this has been a critical part of gaining acceptance with all inmates.

A general semi-structured interview format (including “warm-up” non-controversial or neutral questions: such as questions about education, family connections, self-reported issues/problems etc.) have been used to explore two sets of specific questions designed to address militancy and solidarity.

**Assessment A** – (beliefs in militancy; radicalisation) measures changes in terrorist inmates’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviour towards the Indonesian and Philippine governments; their perceptions and intentions towards the use of violence to assist fellow Muslims or to protect their faith; their perceptions about whether Muslims are repressed and besieged by ‘infidel’ forces; their perception about whether they are at war or peace with the Philippine government; and their feelings about their treatment by the government.

**Assessment B** – (inmate solidarity/adaptation) measures changes in group loyalty by exploring the terrorist inmates’ commitment to their immediate social group; their willingness to befriend outsiders of Islam; their willingness to take risks to support their social group; the extent to which they would take risks to support their social group; the impact of the pains of imprisonment and the degree to which they view their social life as solely prison oriented. I have supplemented both interview and recorded data by drawing on a broader informant network consisting of prison staff and gang leaders who will also be consulted about their perception of religious observance and gang participation/affiliation for participants (e.g. adherence to gang rules and activities, dress standards and language will be relevant). The repeated interview design combined with the observations of informants should help in triangulating the reliability and validity of the data collected from inmates.



## Preliminary Findings

It is too early in the study to provide any conclusive evidence about the best ways to house terrorist offenders in the Philippines and there is still much research to be done. Certainly from an observational perspective and from interviews conducted over the past three years, there have been no visible signs of radicalisation in NBP, and the dispersion model seems to be effective in bringing about change. In one case study, an Indonesian inmate with affiliations to JI, has appeared to have disengaged for extremism over his 11 year sentence. His leadership position within a gang, his active participation in prison sport (badminton), coupled with new qualifications in massage and reflexology has provided him new interests and direction in life. He has also remarried and had three children. Even though he still remained vocal about Indonesian politics, his new career and family has brought about significant change in his life. Whether this can be classed as de-radicalisation is yet to be determined but certainly he appears to have disengaged. There are other stories like him. In fact, most terrorist offenders up until last year have appeared to be model prisoners with very few of them having violated prison rules. Some have taken on gang leadership roles and there is one working productively in the prison hospital.

But, much gets unnoticed in the chaotic overcrowded conditions, particularly when there is serious gang trouble and guard attention focuses on weaponry and drugs rather than potential signs of prison radicalisation. Without close observation there is much that gets unnoticed by the guards. For example, in 2013, NBP administration only became aware of an Arabic and Islamic school that was being run out of the Mosque within the prison. The school was founded by Muslim inmates in 2010 and is now headed by an Indonesian terrorist inmate with former associations to JI. He received an indefinite sentence (without the possibility of parole) in 2005 for multiple murder and multiple frustrated murder.

On face value, his leadership position in the Mosque immediately raises concerns. One would expect that a well-known terrorist running Islamic studies has the potential to radicalise and recruit other inmates. So far this has not been case although further scrutiny is still required. On a positive note, however, in early 2014 he applied to have his Islamic studies course formally recognised by the prison's education department. There was no apparent violent radical discourse in the curriculum, although his teaching would need to be monitored more closely to be certain.

Nonetheless, prison dynamics are very fluid and, just as in the outside world, international events can disrupt the peace very quickly. Over the past twelve months, particular since the rise of the so-called Islamic State, there have been early indications of a change in temperament within the leadership in an area where Muslim inmates congregate in NBP – the Muslim camp. There was also an incident in early January 2014 where a hand grenade detonated in the Muslim camp. The incident was investigated and deemed not to be terrorist related, but instead was a dispute between two dominant groups, the Tausug (ASG associated) and the Maranao (businessmen).

Over the past six months, some terrorist offenders in NBP have become less cooperative and secretive of the activities of their colleagues. This may have been brought about by the transfer of five new JI inmates from MMDJ to NBP in December 2014. Some of these inmates were allegedly behind a video that appeared on an internet site in July 2014 showing Muslim detainees in the Philippines performing the Bay-ah to Baghdadi. The detention area appeared to be one of the SICA facilities. Though Philippine law

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## Desistance and Deradicalisation - The case of Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland has a long history of terrorism and political violence, the most recent period of conflict lasting from 1969 to (arguably) the signing of the Belfast or Good Friday agreement (GFA) in 1998. As a part of the peace process that led to and emerged out of this agreement, almost five hundred *politically motivated* prisoners were released from prison (McEvoy, Shirlow & McElrath, 2004). These individuals returned to their homes and communities, some committed to non-violence, others choosing to return to involvement in violence via existing loyalist groups, and what is commonly called “dissident republicanism.”

Understanding the choice of ex-political prisoners to further engage in violence or alternatively seek other avenues to contribute to a continued resistance to what they deem *injustices* is poorly understood. While the recidivism rate of politically motivated offenders is significantly lower than the mainstream *criminal* population (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008), there is evidence to suggest that not all of those released under the GFA lived up to the assumption that they would no longer represent a danger to the general public. However, a significant community of ex-prisoners exists in Northern Ireland (NI), individuals who are active peaceful contributors to their local communities. For example, some have chosen to support lobbying initiatives for fellow prisoners and their families, participate in peace work through cross community events, involve themselves in youth work related to community divisions, work with youth on behalf of the probation services, conduct research and work in schools around issues emerging from their troubles (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008).

While these ex-prisoners can conceivably be considered to be actively contributing to NI society, albeit it in spite of societal restrictions on full participation (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008), their desistance from violence is only one element of their transition from violence to peace.

The complexity inherent in encouraging individuals to end their participation in terrorism and political violence has been well researched particularly using the frame of de-radicalisation. Various researchers (Horgan, 2006) have documented the necessary factors that both push and pull individuals to end their participation in violence, as well as the social and legal measure that can encourage individuals towards non-offending. However research that focuses specifically on the cognitive process of de-radicalisation has been less comprehensive. In effect, de-radicalisation is a loosely used term that blurs distinctions between desistance and disengagement as explanatory frameworks thus concealing the conceptual peculiarities of both processes. In the case of Northern Ireland, the majority of the ex-prisoners are known to have desisted from political violence, however they have by no means de-radicalised from the views that led them to, or guided them through their choices in the first place.

Radicalisation as an explanatory concept has gained significant currency in the academic literature on terrorism and even though it lacks conceptual clarity it is also considered to have a causal relationship to terrorism (Mandeville, 2009; Hopkins 2004, 2011; McDonald 2011). As a result, outlining individual vulnerabilities that may *predict* radicalisation has become a central feature of terrorism research (Lynch, 2013). The assumption here is of course that radicalisation leads to terrorism and political violence and inversely *deradicalisation* is the pathway out of violence. This circular logic has not furthered our understanding of terrorism and ultimately as an independent variable, radicalisation is poorly conceptualized and of questionable value.

Furthermore, despite the investment in radicalisation research along with the programmes claiming to *do* deradicalisation, there is little evidence as to the utility of the radicalisation framework in these processes nor evidence of the success or failure of these initiatives (Horgan & Braddock, 2009). Holding radical beliefs about the utility of violence is one potential element of participation in terrorism and political violence, however whether it is causal or a necessary antecedent is a very different debate. Existing literature has demonstrated that the emergence of radical ideas that support political violence often develop after an initial commitment to a movement (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008) or during imprisonment. As Horgan (2006) points out, people join violent movements for many reasons, not all of them related to an ideology, a propensity for violence or a desire to counter act some notion of injustice.

What we can measure and thus potentially understand is the decision of individuals to terminate or reduce their involvement in identifiable acts of terrorism, including identifying recidivism through incidents of repeat prosecution. In effect, this is measuring desistance from terrorist behaviours. As a criminal act, incidences of terrorism and political violence (TPV) are complex due to the legislative system in place specifically to address such

ideologically motivated actions, but also due to the inherent complexity in defining and understanding what constitutes a terrorist act, including the support for terrorism as a criminal venture. As an explanatory framework, the notion of desistance is well developed in criminology and a number of iterations and developments in the approach have occurred over the past thirty years. However, as a framework for understanding an individual's choice to withdraw from violent political offending the application of the approach is somewhat more complex.

Using the notion of desistance to understand the movement away from terrorism and political violence in the case of NI is a difficult criminological concept to apply. In attempting to understand desistance, an obvious place to begin is the main paramilitary groups' decisions to agree to the 1998 GFA, and subsequent ceasefires terminating ultimately in disarmament. In NI, from this point on, there was a significant reduction in terrorist acts as the main groups agreed to forgo violence as a tactic to achieve their aims. However, this marker, (the GFA) is in behavioural terms, an arbitrary point as it is impossible to link the onset of desistance, to the point at which the choice to stop violent offending changed (Bushway et al., 2003). Similarly, such a static criteria ensures that all relevant offenders are treated equally, and those longstanding members of the organization may well proceed through a very different individual process in comparison to younger more inexperienced individuals. In effect, understanding the process by which regular and serious offenders choose to desist and understand the process of desistance for new, or more casual offenders may well be poorly understood by attempting to see the progression as a static process. In the case of NI, conceptualizing desistance is further complicated given Bushway et al's (2003) criteria for measurement—an actual measure of non-violence in comparison to a stated commitment to non-violence; there is a significant disparity between these positions. In such a case desistance could conceivably be categorized as temporary.

Furthermore given that terrorist violence is a relatively rare behaviour for each individual group member (although support activities may be more prevalent), static measures of participation versus non-participation are not best placed to account for the behavior of individual terrorist offenders. More appropriate would be to view desistance as a developmental process (Bushway et al., 2003), a method that allows a lifespan approach to understanding the choice not to engage in violent political protest. For a number of reasons, this approach is more useful and ensures the notion of desistance has greater utility in terrorist research. For one, there is no way to determine whether the current phase of desistance is permanent. Given this, frameworks from developmental criminology advocate the study of *within* individual changes over the lifespan (Bushway et al.). However, in instances of group offending, or offending with a supportive narrative or ideology, the issue of individual change is but one element of the process. Again, approaches from developmental criminology recognize this complexity through the notion of equifinality – the idea that causality is multifaceted and multiple casual processes can result in a similar outcome (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996 in Bushway et al.) and in the case of the terrorist *group* societal factors need to be considered.

Along with the complex issues of causality for desistance, there are complex issues that relate to offending in the specific case of terrorism. Not all terrorist activity is violent, much of the support activity may not even be illegal, however, all participants are assumed, by virtue of their group membership, to be offenders. Analyzing all members of the organisation as a unified whole will hide the more radical process undertaken by those intransigent members who have committed serious violent attacks. Similarly, seeking uniformity in the process will prevent an understanding of the fringe offenders. Importantly in the case of terrorist offending in NI, there is a complexity around the type of and classification of offending. By virtue of their illegal group membership, all activity by such individuals may well be classed

as terrorism, however there is a significant but unquantifiable category of activity, that of non-political crime – that plays a significant part in the overall offending pattern by these individuals. Desistance from the very rare violent terrorist activity is one aspect of understanding desistance from terrorism, but offending more generally is also a part of the story. This approach directs the discussion away from notions of offending towards our poor conceptualizations of what terrorism actually is. Terrorism is in small part, the spectacular incidents of public violence, however, terrorism is in large part, normal day to day criminality and supportive legal and illegal behavior. Whether these can be separated, or more importantly, for the individual, whether these are seen as separate processes needs to be considered.

Taking the traditional approach to desistance, there are offenders and after a set point, there are non-offenders. In the case of the post peace process environment in NI, this clearly fits the narrative that emerged from the negotiations in 1998. However, superimposing this narrative of static non-offending onto the dynamic ex-offender population reveals little about the process leading to the current and arguably tentative state of non-violence. In the case of group splits, ongoing support activities, dissident violence and mainstream criminality, attempting to understand desistance as a trajectory rather than a static measurement may be more revealing.

In a study by Bushway et al. (2003), there were some interesting findings using the dynamic approach to desistance. Using a theoretical analysis, the authors were able to infer from existing data that individuals who could be seen as desisters, were more likely to be low-level offenders in the first place. Rates of desistance overall were also closely linked with rates of offending. Importantly, issues related to age at commencement of illegal activity and duration of offending were also central to understanding desistance. These findings have particular implications for a multi-role organization like, for example, the PIRA.

Again relying on the dynamic process approach to desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001) identified two separate elements of particular relevance: a gradual social transition involving individual behavioral and perceptual change, and a termination of the offending behavior. Elements in this process include aging, peer exposure, social learning, social control etc. However, in the case of NI and terrorist offending, the role of the group must also be a key variable. Without being able to link an individual desistance process to a group's ultimate termination of offending, it is difficult to link causal factors to terrorist desistance.

Interestingly and a particular issue in the case of NI's political violence is the notion of false desistance. Given the very low prosecution and even arrest rate for terrorist violence in Northern Ireland, the probability that someone is assumed to have desisted from terrorist offending, even if offending continues in one form or another leads to what is referred to as false desistance (Bushway et al., 2001). This notion of false desistance is particularly relevant in the case of terrorism given the inherent grey areas of the phenomenon. Support activities - ideological, strategic and operational - can persist undetected even in cases of apparent desistance. In the case of terrorist violence and particularly in terms of counter terrorism policing, the utility of the notion of desistance becomes then related not to a process of termination of offending, but a qualitative issue related to the nature of the offending, ultimately linked to a reduction in the *severity* of the crime. Measuring desistance for political offenders then becomes less about criminality and more about the reduction of violence whereby certain group activities are *tolerated* although illegal, for the purpose of restraining the outbreak of violent conflict; in reality that means that traditional static notions of desistance are inappropriate for understanding the process of reduction in terrorist offending.

Also important in considering the utility of desistance as a useful concept in understanding the move away from terrorist offending in Northern

Ireland is the impact of group processes on the individual trajectory. Criminological theory refers to peer influence and proximity to delinquent peers as key causal factors in understanding the propensity to offend, but also the possibility to desist. However, little is known about the role of a coherent physical and ideological group in encouraging or dissuading desistance. The role of the group may assist in the alteration of the rate of offending given opportunity, ideology and target selection, resources etc., but it may also assist in the termination of offending for ideological reasons, and as a result of political negotiations. However, both of these processes may be reached for individual members by fundamentally different routes (Horgan, 2005).

In considering desistance in terms of its applicability to terrorist offending, there needs to be a consideration of two key factors, the traditional criminological focus on life course and life events as well as the notion of group desistance; terrorist offending can terminate or evolve based on trajectories emerging from both perspectives. In the case of group desistance, the relatively limited criminological literature is predominantly concerned with gang criminality. Naturally, there are a number of conceptual differences, however there are important lessons that can be drawn from what we already know about desistance research with gangs. In terms of the group nature of the gang and the terrorist organization, there are a number of conceptual similarities that link both phenomenon: the process of *leaving* the group/gang and the reduction versus termination of offending (Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013). In terms of *leaving* the group, research from the criminological literature demonstrates that status change is a central element in gang desistance. During the process of desistance, due to a termination of the relationship with the gang, there are identifiable changes in status for the former gang members. This is particularly applicable in the case of criminal gangs as research has demonstrated, that for youths, gang membership is predominantly transitory and so status change is an inevitable occurrence (Carson et



al., 2013). In the case of terrorism research, due to the clandestine nature of the organization and the layers of membership that exist, understanding membership longevity is less clear-cut. However, in the case of NI, *leaving* the terrorist group cannot be conceived of as a definitive action because there is a complexity related to an individual's involvement initially in the paramilitary group and subsequently participation in *related* (albeit it non-violent) organisations. In many cases these non-violent organisations comprise of the same members with a very similar if not identical ideological underpinning. Many of these non-violent groups emerged in Northern Ireland around the time of the Good Friday Agreement, initially as support groups for prisoners and ex-prisoners, but later they evolved into groups that acted in a community support/social justice role (McEvoy, Shirlow & McElrath, 2004). While the aim or purpose of these organizations is not in question, in terms of the support they offer members and the fact that in effect membership of these non-violent groups can conceivably mediate the potential status change for members may have interesting implications for how we conceptualise desistance in the case of terrorism and political violence.

According to McEvoy et al. (2004) in terms of the *personal* lives of ex-prisoners, there was an acute period of readjustment of personal status that faced most former prisoners in NI. However, whether the involvement in a non-violent group and related community activities mediated some of the individual level status interruption is an important question. The implication is of course that in the case of NI, desistance may well be unrelated to the termination of membership of an organization and more specifically quantified by ideological consistency, maintenance of a similar historic narrative, non-offending and as a result a qualitative reduction in the nature of offending. Another significant issue unique to desistance from (group) terrorist violence is the issue of top down decisions affecting the option or opportunity to offend. In the case of NI and the PIRA, the ceasefires variously declared on numerous oc-

casions, but ultimately finalised in 2005 were a significant if not the ultimate arbiter of the choice to continue violent offending (although so called rogue actions occurred). This is problematic for some theorists who advocate for a definition of desistance that recognizes the voluntary nature of the process (Shover, 1996). However, it is essential to recognise that the peace process in NI was not merely an elite led process, it involved community change and significant transition on the ground (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008). Therefore it can be reasonably assumed that in tandem with the high level political negotiations, a very local and at time personal journey to desistance was underway for paramilitary group members. Furthermore, given the existence and emergence of dissident organizations, for individual group members, the ceasefires did not dictate the process, as the option to defect to groups who continued to use violence was open for some. Importantly, the trajectory of group level processes towards non-violence do not capture the idiosyncrasy of individual decisions to desist, as many ex-prisoners had made this choice prior to any official announcement. Regardless, in the application of theories of desistance to TPV, it is important to separate the termination of violent behaviour from the process of desistance itself (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Another significant issue of concern in the application of desistance theory to terrorist behavior is the long advocated predictor of desistance – the issue of maturational reform. While there are many hypotheses as to the causal factors potentially leading to desistance, there are a number of “sturdy correlates” (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 1) notably, marriage, employment, identity transformation, and aging. This fits with assumptions in criminological theory that relate delinquency to offending and subsequently links termination of offending with maturation. In the case of terrorism research, whether this process is linked to the decline in the activity of the group or some individual process, it is difficult to comprehend due on the one hand to the interrelatedness of the constructs but also the unavailability of data. Even

trying to comprehend and collate gross statistics is difficult. Estimates of the ex-prisoner population in NI range from 20-30,000 individuals, and currently estimates claim that between 14 and 31% of the NI population aged 50-59 have been imprisoned for politically motivated crimes (Jamieson, Shirlow & Grounds, 2010). However, what is clear is the progressive importance of *prison avoidance* for the ex-prisoners. This is in line with research by Shover (1996) that found that fear of incarceration increased with age. Confounding the understanding of desistance with maturation for terrorist behaviour is the issue of group role and established expertise. For example, in the case of the PIRA, expert bomb makers were a necessary element in the organization, and the possibility for desistance may not have emerged given the value placed upon and the status of that role.

In considering how we understand the *end* of terrorist activity, desistance has significant conceptual utility. This short note highlights the potential contributions of criminological theory to our understanding of desistance and de-radicalisation. It is vital to recognize that there is a long history of research into many types of crime, both ideologically motivated and otherwise, and this body of work should be recognized as a significant reference source. Reimagining our understanding of political violence due to the emergence of dominant narratives related to the existential threat of *new terrorism*, serves only to blind us to well tested frameworks for understanding violence, but also allows for the emergence of politically led, empirically weak, conceptually confused efforts at explanation.

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## The Evolving Identities of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

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**KEYWORDS:** *child soldiers, Colombia, identity, reintegration*

For the last fifty years, Colombia has suffered the effects of violent guerrilla warfare, making it Latin America's longest running armed conflict. Inequality and injustice in the appropriation of land ownership and other economic resources are said to be important factors in the development and prolongation of the conflict. Drug trafficking and the lack of political and socio-economic opportunities are also key contributing factors (Basta ya, 2012).

In its study of Colombia's armed conflict, the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Centre for Historical Memory) has identified four critical periods in the conflict's evolution. The first period, from 1958 to 1982, marked the transition from bipartisan violence to subversive violence, alongside the proliferation of guerrilla groups. (Basta ya, 2012). The second period, between 1982 and 1996, saw the political projection and military growth of the guerrillas, the emergence of paramilitary groups, as well the proliferation of conflict-related drug trafficking. This period also marked the creation of a new constitution in 1991, alongside several failed peace agreement attempts. The third period, from 1996 to 2005, was one of the bloodiest due to the growth and strengthening of the illegal armed groups and the radicalization of political views in favor of a military solution to the armed conflict. The fourth period, from 2005 to the present, has been marked by a resurgence of a strong military offensive on the part of the Colombian government military, significantly debilitating illegal armed groups. This period has also seen peace negotiations with FARC, which remain ongoing.

At the early stages of Colombia's armed conflict, there was very little evidence to suggest that children were used in hostilities. However, as the armed conflict has progressed, paramilitary and guerrilla groups began to adopt new recruitment strategies that included the mobilization of children. Due to the perceived benefits in using the young, vulnerable, and obedient, the recruitment of children became endemic in the 1990s. By 2003, Human Rights Watch (2003) estimated that there were at least 11,000 children recruited into armed groups in the country. Children are now said to compose 30% of all members of armed groups in Colombia, while over 60% of those in urban militias are believed to be children (Burgess, 2009).

The challenges that children and youth face in the context of armed groups and armed violence are significant and undeniable, including multiple forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence, exploitation, deprivation and other gross human rights violations. These challenges do not abruptly end upon exiting an armed group, but instead change shape (Jones & Denov, 2015). The difficult and complex transition from a militarized life in an armed group to a civilian life has been well documented (Helmus & Glenn 2004; Marlowe, 2001). Given the extended periods of time that children and youth are often associated with an armed group, upon exiting, they are faced with the need to be reintegrated into norms and institu-

tions from which they had been isolated, often for years. To assist with child soldier reintegration, since 1999, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) has provided assistance to former child soldiers (those under the age of 18) from all armed groups who have been captured by the Colombian army or have deserted and handed themselves in to the authorities. Known as the “Attention Program for Children and Adolescents”, a total of 4,811 children were assisted through this program between 1999 and 2011, of which 72% were boys and 28% were girls (Watchlist, 2012). For a child who has been demobilized from an armed group, the care aspect of ICBF programming involves support and protection. Family reunification is a priority. However, for security reasons it is not always possible for the child to return to his or her family of origin. Such children may be placed within an institutional or foster family setting. In these cases, the Attention Program focuses on psychosocial care, education, job training, and support for productive initiatives. When the child becomes an adult s/he may join the reintegration program for former adult combatants where s/he can continue to receive support, as needed.

Given the challenges of reintegration post-demobilization, this paper traces the realities and experiences of 22 former Colombian child soldiers regarding their perspectives of reintegration, particularly as it relates to identity. Drawing on their own voices, this paper explores the process of identity construction in child soldiers both during and following their involvement in an armed group, exploring issues of identity transformation, gender, and reflections on reintegration and reconciliation.

## Methodology

This study, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), has examined the reintegration experiences of a group of demobilized youth who had been associated with various armed groups during the course of an armed conflict. A qualitative research design was employed because it is particularly conducive to garnering young people’s direct experiences of and perspectives on reintegration. A key aim of the fieldwork was to gain not only an understanding of the youth’s experiences following demobilization, but as well their reflections and interpretations of these experiences, as well as their psychosocial effects.

To explore participants’ experiences of reintegration, in 2010, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews in Spanish with 22 respondents who had been formerly associated with an armed group in Colombia — twelve male and ten female. At the time of the interviews, all respondents were over 18 (ranging from 19-27 years) and living in an urban context in the province of Quindío. The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed and trans-

lated into English. All our respondents had been recruited by an armed group when they were under 18 (ranging between 8 and 16 years old) and had remained with the group for an extended period of time (ranging from 3 months to 8 years). All 22 participants had been displaced from their communities of origin, had received support from ICBF and were living in an urban context.

As with all self-report data, the interviews with participants were invariably affected by their willingness to divulge personal information and experiences. The potential fear of stigmatization and recrimination may have prevented some participants from openly disclosing some of their experiences, while it may have led others to alter aspects of their stories. The potential flaws of self-disclosure must therefore be taken into account when considering participants’ stories. Moreover, given the small sample size, the findings of the study can in no way be generalized to the larger population of former child soldiers in Colombia.

## **Evolving Identities: The Making and Unmaking of a Warrior**

The notion of identity is vital to understanding the conflict and post-conflict realities of former child soldiers as they transition from civilian life to military life (as in the case of military recruitment), and then once again as they transition from military life to a civilian existence (during demobilization and reintegration). In this paper, we refer to the concept of identity as it is presented in Colombia's Attention Program. Identity is understood as "the versions or theories that we build about ourselves in the conversations with others and in different cultural family or social contexts" ("Support Modules," 2007, p. 25). Accordingly, the concept of identity is multidimensional: "it is possible to be a victim of the armed conflict, and at the same time be a student, and a demobilized person." (Support modules 1, 2007, p. 25). Identity, therefore, changes and alters over time and through diverse experiences and social realities. In this sense, identity is not singular - most people learn to have multiple identities. One can be a mother and a physician, or an athlete and a community leader. However, the identity that becomes prominent depends largely on the context (Wessels 2006, p. 82). In addition, the relational aspect of identity is significant: identity is not "an essence, an attribute or an intrinsic property of the subject, but has a relational character and it emerges and is confirmed only in the confrontation with other identities (Gimenez, 2002, p. 4).

Alongside the notion of identity, the concept of social representations is also significant to understanding the reality of former child soldiers. "Belonging to a group implies sharing to some degree the core of the social representations that characterizes and defines that group." These representations "serve and frame the perceptions and interpretations of reality and provide guidelines for behaviors and social practices" (Gimenez, 2002, p. 7).

To explore and understand the realities of identity

construction and transformation among Colombian former child soldiers, in the following section we highlight the voices and perspectives of our study participants. In particular, we explore identity as it relates to military recruitment or becoming a warrior, identity, war and gender, as well as identity construction following demobilization or becoming a civilian.

## **Militarized Identities: Becoming a Warrior**

*The day they took me and kept me, was very difficult because ... I began to cry, I was only twelve years old. ... I missed my mother...but everything takes practice, and one gets used to it ... I got used to it and I forgot everything [about my past] (male child soldier, March 2010).*

Many of our participants were abducted by armed groups and coercively made to participate in armed conflict. Others, however, made the decision to join. For participants who reported joining an armed group, several factors were reported as paramount in their decision to join. These included: conflict in their family of origin, lack of education and job opportunities, the presence of armed groups in the area, poverty and promises of financial rewards, a search for power, and self-worth. The glamour associated with armed groups was also enticing. As this participant explained:

*I was not forced to leave my family ... We didn't have much money and we would see that my friend's brother had a great life, he went to the city, bought a car, had money and he made us dream about it ... so we joined the group. But when we got there, it was all the opposite (male child soldier, 2010).*

Importantly, whether joining the group by force or non-force, participants did not enter the armed groups with a militarized identity. Rather, this developed over time and was linked to multiple factors. As the quotes below illustrate, these factors included military and ideological indoctrination, radicalization, fear and threats, a search for power, and promises of benefits - all of which - came

early in the recruitment and training process:

*The first combat that I had was very hard. A partner would yell at me: if you don't fight, if you don't calm down and start firing they will kill you... Do it for your daughter, remember that you have a daughter, then one loses fear and gets used to it but ... they start killing partners beside you and they ask you for help and you cannot help them because if you do, then they kill you (female child soldier, 2010).*

*With a uniform and after four months I was the second operator of the machine gun... If you show that you are courageous, that you are a warrior, you gain certain benefits (male child soldier, 2010).*

*In one year one learns how to participate in combat ... they tell you that the government is your enemy (male child soldier, 2010).*

*A guerrillera doctor examines you, she undresses you and looks at everything... to make sure you don't have any venereal disease. Then comes the training, to learn how to move forward on the ground, learn how to walk without making noise, without breaking branches. After a year, they make you pass a life or death test, they set up barbed wire ...with explosives and light them up. They make you go under without touching that, I have the marks... then they give you a rifle, a gun, the uniform and they tell you that you are a normal guerrilla man (male child soldier, 2010).*

*There is a book in the guerrilla, a book that is called 'The Four Corners' and that book lists all the things a guerrillero can do, ... the rights and obligations, it is a book like the ones the government has about the rights and obligations (male child soldier, 2010).*

*I liked it, when I entered the FARC, I was in love with it ...even if they took me by force...by being there, being able to manipulate the weapons, to have the power... and it makes you feel good (male child soldier, 2010).*

The training participants received, the uniform, the use of arms, and the use of indoctrination into a militarized world vision that identified violence

as justified, all conveyed an identity - a feeling of belonging, power and pride that was – for many - attractive and enticing. Over time, through a complex and powerful mix of coercion and individual agency, many former child soldiers became immersed in and ultimately adopted a militarized identity and, in their words, “became a warrior.”

## Gender, Femininity and Identity

Participation in an armed group often disrupted gender norms, roles and responsibilities for many young women coming from traditional Colombian households. Within armed groups, many female participants reported being treated as ‘equals’ with their male counterparts. Within the wartime context of hyper-masculinity, this meant an abandonment of traditionally feminine qualities and roles:

*When one goes over there [to war], one does men things and does not have women's intimacy. It gets lost. You do men things and you are with men. ... The punishments are equal. We have to open trenches, go through the same training and wear the same camouflage. Everything, everything ... One acts the same and gets used to it, and loses the feeling of being a woman (female child soldier, 2010).*

This participant explained how her feminine identity was suppressed within the armed group:

*I did not value myself, I felt like I was not a woman but a man. I would dress like a man. I would act as a man...and I did not feel the difference because they do not let you feel the difference (female child soldier, 2010).*

Moreover, expressing one's femininity after leaving the armed group was described as both challenging and satisfying:

*[After demobilization] Now...I can wear a skirt, I can fix my hair, I can dye it, I can wear makeup...I can be more like myself...I had no idea what would look nice on me, what I could wear and slowly I got used to it. The adaptation was very difficult (female child soldier, 2010).*



For some female participants, entering motherhood following demobilization jolted them back in touch with their femininity, restoring a sense of purpose:

*When I got pregnant, I was very happy from the first time that I found out until the end...my baby. When I found out, it brought me such happiness, such an internal satisfaction just to know that I was going to take care of a little person for whom I would live. That made me feel many things and in a way I feel that my son is the final touch in feeling like a woman and a good one. I felt that (female child soldier, 2010).*

For this participant, becoming a mother reportedly gave her more confidence and certainty over who she was:

*It gave more security, I would walk on the streets and feel safer, safer about what I could say or affirm as a woman (female child soldier, 2010).*

Becoming a mother also represented hope for a new start during a difficult period in their lives. For many, the journey from war to civil society was bitter and lonely. Many participants did not return to their families and their communities, but were forced to relocate, due to fear of retaliation by armed groups. Becoming a mother offered some female participants the chance to redefine themselves with renewed hope and purpose:

*It was a unique experience, an experience that emanates a lot of tenderness. A lot of hope, one feels that one has someone to fight for; someone who will accompany you, part of you that will start living, a hope (female child soldier, 2010).*

Given the hyper-masculinity associated with the armed groups, some females reported that notions of identity, femininity and accepted gender roles had to be relearned in the post-demobilization context. Pregnancy for some was the ultimate confirmation of femininity.

## Reflections on Recruitment and Demobilization: The Unmaking of a Warrior

Within the logic and context of war, extreme violence and killing often became normalized and even - at the extreme - acts deserving of recognition and praise. However, in the aftermath of violence and in the context of social reintegration, young people's awareness of the ethical implications and the consequences of their violent actions as warriors become evident. Participants' narratives not only demonstrate their capacity to reflect on the consequences of their violent past, but also their profound implications:

*I did forgive myself, but there are many things about my past, knowing that one has killed another person is...sad even though one knows ...that it was that person [killed] or oneself. It does hurt... (female child soldier, 2010).*

*On one hand, to have that experience is good...I am capable to know what is good and bad... when I am going to do something, I think about it a lot.... But on the bad side of it, I lost my family because of it and I can't forgive myself for that. To lose your family for something that is not worth three pesos (male child soldier, 2010).*

*Consequences in the sense that I cannot live safely in any community or village or city ...One remains very reactive, very alert, on the defensive (female child soldier, 2013).*

*You cannot forget so easily so there are nightmares. If I am sleeping while it rains and there is lightening, it is horrible for me because I wake up disturbed, I think of things that are not related. I feel paranoid (female child soldier, 2010).*

The experiences of recruitment, of life in the armed groups, and of demobilization, left a powerful imprint on the minds of our participants. Moreover, during the process of reintegration and through the Attention Program they had the opportunity to reflect on their wartime actions and to confront their former and current view of

themselves, their worldview and the consequences of their actions. Participants asserted that despite the horrors they experienced and participated in, their participation in war provided important life lessons that will remain with them:

*One has sequels ... you learn something...if you do something and if you like it you keep doing it ... like killing someone, I liked it, I used to like it ... when I left (the group) some people made me change... (Now) I would not do it, not even for money (male child soldier, 2010).*

*I think everything in life teaches you, in a more personal way, in a profound way, a lesson. Everything that I have learned there I will not repeat. I can choose because now I know... it was personal growth, a learning process. I think that it has been a unique experience (female child soldier, 2010).*

## Reconciliation & Former Child Soldiers

There are an array of societal reactions to child participation in armed conflict, as well as their reintegration into civil society. Societal and community reactions in Colombia have tended to vary on a continuum from outright social stigma and rejection to full support for their plight. These participants discussed the stigma that they experienced and its implications:

*People in the community knew who we were [that we were former child soldiers]. So one would ask to talk to someone and they would reject you. One would go to the store to buy something and people would look at you as if you were the worst thing... So we were getting tired of that because we would be rejected everywhere. Where they didn't reject us, they would give us the things while staring at us ... it was hard for the identity of the person...When we arrived, after a month [of experiencing rejection], everyone wanted to leave [and return to the armed groups] (male child soldier, 2010).*

*One needs to get used to it, life here is very hard. One goes out in the street and [people] look at you and say: 'Look at the guerrillero' [guerilla boy] even though you don't look like that anymore ... people who know [that I was*

*in an armed group] treat me badly and say that I will be a terrorist, a guerrillero (male child soldier, 2010).*

In response to the varied reactions, children and youth appeared to develop strategies to cope and manage the reactions. In many cases, respondents made efforts to conceal their past in order to prevent physical harm to themselves or their families, and to avoid blame and rejection:

*Society can help. I think they are already helping....trying to defend us and providing us with support because if you come from there, it is very hard to find employment but they do help us and train us (female child soldier, 2010).*

*Maybe I don't talk about it because of what people think ...people know that you are a killer and they are mean and people think you are mean. They don't give a job to someone like me (male child soldier, 2010).*

*I came here today camouflaged, I brought this small hat and these glasses (male child soldier, 2010).*

Importantly, former child soldiers in our sample were not trying to obliterate, negate or deny their violent past. However, they made attempts to hide their former identities as child soldiers in order to protect themselves. They made efforts to adjust to civilian life and to see themselves as good citizens, and they also wanted to be perceived as such. Participants viewed their lives within the illegal armed groups as part of a learning experience that they did not wish to repeat. However, they realized that their "biographical past as unchangeable and inalienable" (Gimenez, 2002, p.5).

Given the realities of stigma and rejection in the post-conflict lives of former child soldiers, processes of reconciliation are vital. *Agape por Colombia*, is a reconciliation program run by volunteers (many of them victims of the armed conflict themselves) and involves the participation of former child soldiers and other war victims, including victims of forced displacement, refugees, people who suffered kidnappings, as well as members of civil

society. Within the context of this reconciliation program, these diverse groups meet for three days, during which they are encouraged to share their wartime experiences in a secure environment. Contact among the former child-soldiers, other victims and members of the civil society takes place in a supportive atmosphere that invites dialogue capable of changing perceptions and mutual stereotypes.

The presence of former child soldiers in the reconciliation process is essential to the program, as it contributes to the increased awareness in the Colombian community with regards to the realities of child recruitment. Through their contributions, the former child-soldiers are no longer passive subjects of institutional attention: they actively contribute to enhance the Colombian social fabric and help other participants to reflect collectively on the impact of the war on everyone's lives. In this sense, former child soldiers become active agents and promoters of reconciliation. Their life stories and their experiences give invaluable testimony of the complexities and damages caused by the armed conflict. Their input is crucial in the exchange dynamics that is established between the former child-soldiers, other victims and members of civil society.

Furthermore, former child soldiers have often never had the opportunity to personally meet those who have been direct victims of the armed groups. Former child soldiers have often never before heard the stories and perspectives, of civilians and the impact of the war on their lives. Getting to know first-hand the ravages caused by the illegal

armed groups has, in our experience, repeatedly provoked instances of spontaneous reconciliation initiated by former child soldiers, who have asked for - and have often been granted - forgiveness. Significantly, Agape has reported and documented these spontaneous reconciliation experiences in virtually every reconciliation gathering.

The presence of civil society has proven to be crucial as, for the most part, victims share their experiences among other victims. The presence of civil society can lead to an awareness on the part of those participants for whom the war has not touched their lives directly. In many cases they have come to realize that in one way or another, all citizens are in some way responsible for the ongoing armed conflict in a society that is characterized by profound social and economic inequality. Members of civil society can also bear witness and lend support to the plight of the victims, facilitating the restoring of victims' dignity through recognition and support and also through the relationships established through Agape's program.

The reconciliation gatherings present an opportunity for all to clarify concepts, and experience the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation. Important networks have also been established through the Agape's reconciliation gatherings and the relationships established have continued through time. Ultimately, these experiences further illustrate the evolving character of the identities of former child soldiers and the enormous possibilities to overcome adversity and to become healthy and productive members of society.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the complex and often painful realities of former child soldiers and their courageous struggle to determine who they were during recruitment, who they have become, and how they are perceived as they adjust to civilian life, alone and far away from their families. Our work supports the idea that these youth have the capacity for reflexivity and the ability to examine themselves, their actions, their options for the future and to make choices that reflect the lessons learned through recruitment, demobilization and reintegration.

Through the narratives of these youth, we can see how the idea of “who I am” and “how I am perceived” evolves in multiple contexts. Values learned during training and becoming a warrior, as well as through demobilization and reintegration are learned and unlearned. Throughout their stories and experiences, we get a glimpse of the reality of the “making” and “unmaking” of child soldiers and the many aspects of their lives that have been impacted by the horrors of war (Denov, 2010).

While former child soldiers appear to make no effort to negate their past, they do conceal it in order to protect themselves from the stigma associated with their former affiliations. Moreover, they appear to reconstruct their identities as civilians and worthy members of society, precisely because of their past experience during the recruitment and in opposition to it.

There are valuable lessons to be learned through the demobilization experiences of Colombian former child soldiers. It is particularly important to understand the conditions that make possible not only their reintegration but also their de-radicalization. Besides well designed government reintegration programs, one of the key ingredients of de-radicalization is the presence and help of a supportive community, that allows children and youth to reflect on their identities and social representations that are different to the ones they had acquired during recruitment.

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## Family Counselling, De-radicalization and Counter-Terrorism: The Danish and German programs in context

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**KEYWORDS:** *family counselling, counter-terrorism, de-radicalization*

Family matters far more in de-radicalization and counter-terrorism work than typically realized. Stable social bonds and relationships are considered to be essential for desistance focussed probation and reintegration work (e.g., Gadd, 2006; Garfinkel, 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2001), effective treatment of PTSD (e.g., Grossman, 2009, p. 288), as well as the success of terrorist de-radicalization programs (e.g., Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Fink & Haerne, 2008; Horgan, 2009). The social environment – and within it more specifically close friends and family, is arguably one of the spaces in which violent radicalization takes place and becomes visible in early stages. Even concerning the phenomenon of the lone wolf terrorists that has previously been considered to be inaccessible, the social environment of the later perpetrator was well aware of the radicalization process taking place:

In 82.4% of the cases, other people were aware of the individual's grievance that spurred the terrorist plot, and in 79%, other individuals were aware of the individual's commitment to a specific extremist ideology. In 63.9% of the cases, family and friends were aware of the individual's intent to engage in terrorism-related activities because the offender verbally told them. (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014, p. 429).

This astonishing high percentage of family and friends knowing about a terrorist's intentions (63.9%) does find support in other in-depth studies of terrorist networks. For example, Marc Sageman (2004) found in his seminal analysis of 172 jihadist terrorists that in 75% of the cases with reliable information pre-existing friendship bonds and kinship were essential to an individual's radicalization process in joining Jihad (Sageman, 2004, p. 111-113). In a similar study of 242 European jihadists, Edwin Bakker (2006) found that "in more than 35 percent of the sample social affiliation may have played a role in recruitment" (Bakker, 2006, p. 42). In other words, the close social environment is most likely the place to recognize the on-set of violent radicalization, and prevent further involvement or intervene in advanced radicalization. Consequently, family and friends – the social environment of radicalized individuals – are most important for early prevention and intervention work, and this fact needs to be addressed with a specifically designed methodology focussing on the role of the family in radicalization processes and counter-terrorism work. This methodology – as designed by the author – needs to rely on strengthening the family as a counterforce against radicalization in an equal partnership with the support provider, and not on using the family as a source of information and intelligence for the authorities. During the last years several highly specialized family counselling programs were developed and started working around Europe mostly motivated by the pressing need expressed by families affected by jihadist radicalization, and the devastating impact of witnessing their relatives leaving to join the violent jihad in Syria and Iraq. These family counselling programs are seen as highly effective, at least in reaching a large proportion of the relevant target groups and approaching the problem of violent home-grown radicalization from a new and innovative perspective

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<sup>1</sup> [www.girds.org](http://www.girds.org)

(Gielen, 2014; Koehler, 2013, 2015; Ranstorp & Hyllengren, 2013; Vidino, 2014). However, more in depth evaluations and methodological development are necessary to ensure the durability and sustainability of these initiatives. Two models from Germany and Denmark have received a high level of international media attention and are widely seen as inspirations for other programs around the globe. This essay introduces and compares these two models and sets them in context with theoretical and practical implications for family counselling programs as de-radicalization and counter-terrorism tools.

## The Theory of Family Counselling and De-radicalization

Previous comparative studies of various de-radicalization programs were able to identify several levels of impact, which de-radicalization strategies and programs need to address. These levels can be differentiated along three dimensions: affective, pragmatic and ideological (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010, p. 42 et seq.).

Regarding the ideological dimension, any de-radicalization (in contrast to “disengagement” programs not focusing on ideology, see Horgan, 2008) program should emphasize the delegitimization and invalidation of an individual’s or a group’s narratives and interpretations. It should also dismantle the previously adopted radical ideology during the de-radicalization process and reach a critical self-assessment of the individual’s past (see Köhler, 2014a).

However another important aspect needs addressing: the different concepts of “violent” and “non-violent” radicalization. “Violent radicalization,” meaning the “radicalization that leads to violence” and “non-violent radicalization,” referring “to the process by which individuals come to hold radical views in relation to the *status quo* but do not undertake, aid, or abet terrorist activity” (see Bartlett & Miller, 2012, p. 2 italics in original) are usually used to describe legitimate and illegitimate (i.e. illegal) forms of radicalization. In need for a sharper concept of the process of radicalization, which security agencies and de-radicalization programs are typically looking at, another approach is used here:

Radicalization can be understood as a process of

individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, and democracy) according with those concepts employed by a specific ideology (see for in detail: Koehler, 2014; Köhler, 2014b).

The more individuals have internalized the notion that no other alternative interpretations of their (prioritized) political concepts exist (or are relevant), the more we can speak (and show) a degree of radicalization. This may happen with varying degrees of *intellectual* reflection, for example quoting a fascist thinker to explain certain behaviour or merely stating to do something because it seemed right within the cognitive framework or collective identity. However, this means that, in accordance with the international debate, a high level of radicalization does not necessarily equal a high level of violent behaviour or extraordinary brutality. Radicalization in this sense is a rather normal phenomenon in society, for example in sports, animal rights movement or dietary preferences such as veganism. The important link here is the fusion (and combination) with a certain type of ideology that *inherently denies individual freedom (or equal rights) to persons not part of the radical person’s in-group, and thusly the degree of ideological incompatibility with the mainstream political culture*. Thus, it is possible to understand how individuals need to act and behave illegally according to the degree of internalized and monopolized political concepts of their ideology, simply because at a certain point no other option is visible to them. This process in fact creates a kind of ticking time bomb: a rapidly *decreasing* amount of alternatives and options in combination with an increasing amount of ideo-



logical calls for action.

To break this ideologically inherent determination of behaviour constitutes a central task in every de-radicalization strategy and program. At the pragmatic level, emphasis is placed on the discontinuance and/or prevention of courses of action that individuals or groups have established in order to achieve their goals. This pillar typically is comprised of what is usually called “disengagement.” Providing for example capacity building, job training, drug treatment, family therapy, and numerous other practical assistance necessary to discontinue the old and start a new life. The pragmatic level also includes matters of personal safety but primarily focuses on the practical basis of changed behaviour.

The affective level addresses the need for individuals to be emotionally supported, and the requirement to establish an alternative reference group. In this regard, family counselling is considered a vital instrument. Family members or friends that are opposing the respective ideology are being empowered in their argumentation and their capacity to take action and provide alternative perspectives. Family counselling is, thus, an important framework factor in de-radicalization processes and supporting attachment figures (in relation to emotions, values, opinions and interest of the radicalized person) greatly increases the chances for a successful de-radicalization.

Family counselling programs – as individual de-radicalization programs – need to address all these three levels. Starting of course with the affective (i.e. the family) level, practical needs of the potentially radicalized individual need to be addressed and – through the family or close friends – ideological references can be countered. The aim of the counselling process is to determine the individual driving factors for the relative’s radicalization (if there is any) and to bring in targeted and highly specific intervention through the close affective social environment. This needs to be done with extreme caution and expertise. It should be

noted however, that there are fundamental methodological differences between family counselling programs and individual de-radicalization programs. First of all most individual de-radicalization programs start with persons willing to leave radical milieus or at least being at some form of potential point of access (e.g. prison). In contrast, family counselling programs typically get in touch with the family of a person right in the middle or in advanced stages of violent radicalization processes. Therefore, the major goal of these counselling programs is to slow down and stop the relative’s radicalization and *induce* a potential de-radicalization process. In this case a very different methodology focusing on the whole family as social unit needs to be deployed. Once the individual de-radicalization process starts another program focusing on the individual’s needs should step in ideally. Another important aspect is the fact that family counselling programs can be seen as hybrids – both working as prevention or counter-radicalization programs (when the program steps in during early phases of radicalization) and intervention programs (e.g., when the family contacts the program in an advanced stage of the relative’s radicalization process). If designed effectively these programs are highly flexible and dynamic being able to shift from an early prevention to intervention and counter-terrorism methodology.

### **The Danish Model**

Dating back to the 1980’s the Danish model builds upon the SSP (school, social services, police) model, which is well established in the community of Aarhus. After 9/11, the model was extended to deal with religious radicalization, when previously youth gang related problems were the main focus. The Danish model is located in full within the Danish police (for an in depth explanation about the Aarhus model see: Agerschou, 2014). Mixed teams of police officers and social workers are located within “info houses,” which exchange information on potentially radicalizing individuals in all directions, for example with schools. This means that either teachers or parents can go to

these “info houses” and report their concerns, or the employed police officers and social workers can reach out to schools if they learn about problematic cases through police channels. The “info houses” are steered by a “task force” comprised of representatives from government agencies and mentors placed under the directorate of the police commissioner. This task force tries to provide potentially de-radicalizing help and contacts for individuals when necessary. Ranging from early prevention, such as problems securing employment or with drugs, to psychological assistance with re-integration and de-radicalization after returning from fighting in Syria. Naturally, these task forces are very well integrated into every aspect of social life within Aarhus and can rely on a very short and effective chain of communication with partners from government or civil society to provide the necessary support. The Danish model is not a family counselling program as such, but includes a family support group as one of many possible intervention methods. This family support group provides counselling, social services and miscellaneous practical help for returnees or in the case of the relative’s death. As highly effective in terms of sorting out security relevant cases demanding judicial or police action from cases where social work methods need to be deployed, the Danish model can be seen as a traditionally grown contact and communication hub within the police regarding youth radicalization. As the level of mistrust on the side of the population is very low, police officers can freely approach and interact with civil society and other partners.

Being built on a very long tradition of cooperation between police, social services and civil society in a small community, the Danish model is exceptionally effective but also unlikely to be transferred successfully to other contexts because of the extensive time necessary to establish an equal amount of legitimacy. Although many other countries would prefer the Danish model as it is effectively run by the police and ensures control through gov-

ernment authorities, a very high degree of mistrust and critique would be most likely the result if police forces would try to exert this level of institutional control in other countries. Data protection and privacy concerns might also be very difficult issues in other contexts, and as soon as the communities are so large that the employed officers or social workers cannot any longer rely on their personal networks the program’s advantage as being located within the police might actually backfire. In this case a similar program might for example be perceived as criminalizing or spying on Muslim communities. Research on reporting mechanisms for deviant behaviour has shown that family and friends resist from reporting to the police directly out of a sense of loyalty and love for their relatives. In addition the concern of consequences has proven to be a very high obstacle for contacting police run programs (Borum, 2013; Rowe, Wilcox, & Gadlin, 2009).

### The German Model

Germany is one of the European states with the largest numbers of citizens having travelled to the Syrian/Iraqi battlefields. Currently about 700 individuals (the unofficial estimations are much higher) have left to fight abroad and about 225 have returned<sup>2</sup> reaching the limits of the law enforcement authorities.<sup>3</sup> However, Germany developed one of the most innovative approaches to tackle home-grown radicalization even before the foreign fighter problem became widely evident.

Having started in 2012 the German model relies on a strong public private partnership hosted and financed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugee Affairs (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge BAMF) as part of the Ministry of the Interior (Endres, 2014) and partially based on the theoretical and methodological concepts designed by the author. Running a nationwide phone hotline for families and concerned persons (teachers, employers, social workers) the BAMF hotline

<sup>2</sup> See for example: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/mehr-terrorbraute-aus-deutschland-a-1039716.html> (accessed July 16, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See for example: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Dec-12/280758-jihadis-stretch-german-justice-to-the-limit.ashx> (accessed January 4, 2014).

provides a free of charge, and if needed anonymous first line counselling before referring the case to a local non-governmental partner within its own network, which currently comprises of four NGOs. These NGOs are then responsible for the actual counselling. Families and concerned persons could also contact one of the NGOs directly. Thusly the counselling network relies on a dual contact structure aiming to reach the maximum of the affected target group. Some families for example prefer contacting government structures, and some strictly refuse to do so. As all NGOs have their own methodological character and approach, this creates a high level of flexibility for the counselling network and the ability to shift cases according to the best fit in regards to approach and counsellor. As the need for close cooperation and case based consultation between these NGOs and the BAMF as part of the government is evident regular meetings are held among the network partners. Having received more than 1500 calls since 2012<sup>4</sup> resulting in more than 420 counselling cases<sup>5</sup> this model can be seen as highly successful in reaching the target group.

One of the network's strengths is also a weakness: the multiple different approaches and methods of the NGOs involved, make it difficult to achieve and hold equal standards in counselling and to create the necessary internal transparency. Within the network there are no clear-cut guidelines on how exactly the counselling should be done, as every NGO more or less follows their own philosophy. This requires a great deal of communication and coordination as well as institutional learning. Building trust between the NGOs (which might not share each other's methods or have competition based differences) is another point that needs to be overcome. In general, the German model relies on a constant case-by-case negotiation of necessary approaches, the role of government authorities and the correct methods. Nevertheless the combined action of government and civil society results in a high grade of flexibility and

adaptability making it possible to utilize the full potential of both actors' (government and civil society) strengths and minimizing their weaknesses. Another aspect to keep in mind about the German model is that it was designed to work with the family. The majority of counselling cases do not involve the radicalized individuals themselves, but the program works instead through the family. Although the number of cases with direct involvement of the radicalized person has grown over the last months, the German model nevertheless tries to focus on the family.

### Keys to Achieving Impact

Although it is too early to see long term effects of these family counselling programs, it is nevertheless possible to deduce some pivotal key lessons from the two models in Denmark and Germany. These lessons can be seen as inspirations or guidelines for other programs trying to work in the field of family counselling as well and are of course only very abstract. More in depth studies and practical guidelines need to follow.

1. Family counselling programs need to focus on the family as a social unit, and at the same time understand the internal family dynamics and individual driving forces behind violent radicalization. These programs need to address these individual factors through the family without compromising the family's integrity. However, it should be clear that the ultimate goal of these programs is to avert dangers (e.g., acts of violence) and reduce risks to the family and society.
2. The family should not be seen as a source of intelligence and information for the authorities, but as partners in early prevention and even intervention work.
3. Clear and transparent procedures and standards are absolutely essential to gain the trust

4 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-18/berlin-muslims-battle-potential-jihadists-in-their-midst> (accessed May 30, 2015).

5 <http://www.hessischer-landtag.de/icc/Internet/med/3b9/3b923b4e-2b4c-a41d-669b-1c202184e373,11111111-1111-1111-1111-111111111111.pdf> page 26, (accessed May 30, 2015).

of the families to achieve any impact. In this regard the main elements are multiple reporting channels, anonymity, accessibility, safety, and credibility.

4. As these family counselling programs are working in a potentially highly security relevant area, a very close cooperation with all responsible governmental agencies is critical. For example this is built into the Danish model by design. In other models such as the German case, government relies on the capabilities of the partner NGOs to make the correct risk assessments and follow the protocols in terms of when and which governmental partner needs to be brought in. In every case the key to success is to find the correct time for the counsellor to switch from preventative to intervention methods. Special expertise, training and experience based on a coherent methodology and theory are also necessary. So far the German model is lacking this special training in risk assessment and counter-radicalization on the side of the NGO partners. Specialized expert training courses like the ones offered through the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS) have so far not been made mandatory for the counsellors in the German network.
5. Family counselling programs are no stand-alone efforts but deeply rely on networks and

partners in every level of society, e.g., religious authorities, probation services, social workers, youth agencies and schools. The role of the counsellor can in many ways be described as a communication and network broker, bringing in the targeted help at the right time.

6. The counselling needs to be flexible and able to work from a very early prevention phase until classical counter-terrorism. The necessary knowledge and expertise needs to be available.
7. Counselling should be available for every person concerned, not just the family. Multiple languages, freedom of charge, and anonymity need to be guaranteed if required.
8. If the program is civil society based data protection and privacy are top priorities for the counsellor. However, there should be a mechanism or procedure in place to ensure that a correct risk assessment leads to the involvement of the responsible authorities at the right time. For example case managers should undergo specialized training in risk assessment tools on a mandatory basis and the performance and expertise of the counsellors should be regularly evaluated by external experts.
9. Standards in training and evaluation need to be set and monitored.

## Conclusion

Specifically designed family counselling programs within the area of de-radicalization and counter-terrorism are a very promising and innovative approach to tackle the issue of home-grown radicalization processes leading to violence and terrorism. The two best established field programs in Germany and Denmark have offered a great deal of insight into the key mechanisms necessary to make family counselling work as de-radicalization tool, and the first numbers of cases as well as the visible impact has led to the creation of similar initiatives worldwide (e.g., Canada, Netherlands, Great Britain, Australia, Austria). However, a lack of coherent standards and methods has resulted in a wide variety of structural designs and approaches. In addition it is still far too early to give academically sound evaluations of these programs' impact and long term effects, as only a few in-depth studies about family counselling have just started. Nevertheless, well designed family counselling programs can easily be seen as one of the most important innovations in counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism during the last years.

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## **PART IV**

Involving the Community in Countering Violent Extremism





## Research Summary: Lessons from a U.S. study revealing the critical role of “gatekeepers” in public safety networks for countering violent extremism<sup>1</sup>

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**KEYWORDS:** *countering violent extremism, CVE, gatekeepers, networks, help-seeking*

Despite their best efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE), neither law enforcement nor intelligence agencies can be everywhere at all times. Furthermore, many potentially worrisome behaviors (e.g., expressing sympathy for a terrorist-labeled group) are not necessarily illegal; thus, intervening through arrests is often not an acceptable option in most western societies.<sup>2</sup> This highlights that radicalization, and any associated level of risk for committing violence, are not dichotomous, but exist on a continuum (Sedgwick, 2010). Therefore, interventions with individuals occupying different points along such a spectrum call for different approaches to mitigating that risk (Klinke & Renn, 2002). Additionally, given the low per capita base rate of terrorists, and self-selection biases that would tend to dissuade those in favor of extremist ideologies from choosing to participate in a presumably wide range of CVE programs, the odds of would-be violent extremists volunteering to participate in CVE programs—much less, subsequently diverting themselves from malevolent trajectories—is slim (Black, 2004).

For all of these reasons, it is immensely important to identify “gatekeepers:”<sup>3</sup> those, by definition, best positioned to notice, and refer, individuals deemed at-risk of engaging in a given undesirable behavior (in this case, an act of violent extremism) to resources that might help divert those individuals from engaging in such behavior. Equally important is to discover barriers preventing those gatekeepers from connecting with CVE-related safety networks so that those connection may be facilitated.

As part of an ongoing study, empirical evidence was found for the belief that peers of would-be violent extremists might be the gatekeepers most likely to be aware of their peers’ violent intentions. However, findings also revealed evidence of a potential, and critical, disconnect between those peers and local CVE-relevant resources (e.g., law enforcement and social services). That disconnect can be considered a barrier to what may be called “vicarious help-seeking:” seeking help for someone other than oneself. This work discusses the source of that disconnect, in addition to key implications, and a prospective part of the solution to bridge that disconnect.

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1 This research is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Justice, under grant #2013-ZA-BX-0003, and the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, under grant #1320-123-0053. Also, this publication is based upon both a research brief submitted, by the authors, to the National Institute of Justice (“Research brief: The critical role of gatekeepers in public safety networks for countering violent extremism”) and their forthcoming article to be published in *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (“The critical role of friends in networks for countering violent extremism: Toward a theory of vicarious help-seeking”). Corresponding author: Michael J. Williams, mickwilliamsphd@gmail.com.

2 The legality of any given expression or behavior varies by nation. Therefore, the point at which law enforcement agencies are entitled to intervene similarly vary.

3 In academic literature, the term gatekeepers is often reserved for teachers, physicians, or other professionals that are in a position to detect problems and make referrals. We use the term to apply not only to such individuals, but to anyone positioned to notice early signs of others’ problematic behaviors.

## Participants

The above-mentioned disconnect was revealed through analyses of original data: collected in both Los Angeles (L.A; in partnership with the LAPD) and the metro Washington D.C. area (as part of an NIJ-funded research project), from 2013 - 2014. Participants in L.A. (n = 33) included members of the LAPD’s liaison unit, Muslim community leaders, and other adult members from several L.A. based Muslim communities. Participants from metro D.C. (n = 139) included members of the Montgomery County Department of Police, the Montgomery County Faith Community Working Group, and community members from Montgomery County (both adults and youth of various faith backgrounds).

## Procedure

Data from L.A. were obtained by two means: a) semi-structured interviews with members of the LAPD, and Muslim community leaders, and b) online surveys of the other L.A. based Muslim community members. Data from metro D.C. were obtained through focus groups with each subgroup of participants. Participants, comprised of the general community, were compensated by \$25 to complete an online survey, or \$50 to participate in a focus group (\$75, in the case of focus group participants comprised of those from the Montgomery County Faith Community Working Group): all paid in the form of Amazon gift cards. Those who participated in semi-structured interviews (including members of the LAPD), were not offered compensation.

Preliminary data from the above sources were initially assessed (i.e., bracketed) for emergent themes by one of the three members of the research team. Subsequently, those themes were assessed and verified by the other two team members. These emergent themes gained further verification as they continued to emerge through

subsequent waves of data, and across each mode of data collection. Therefore, the following results were triangulated across multiple waves of data, and from multiple sources, enhancing our confidence in the findings reported here.

## Key Findings

**The best gatekeepers.** Participants were in consensus regarding their belief that those best positioned to notice early signs of individuals considering acts of violent extremism likely would be those individuals’ peers: perhaps more so than teachers, clergy, or even family members. This does not suggest that other gatekeepers are of little, or no, importance for CVE. However, in contrast to assumptions that teachers, clergy or family members are well-positioned as gatekeepers, it suggests that peers might be in a critical gatekeeping position for intervention.

**A critical disconnect.** A common theme was that despite broad and well-established CVE-relevant safety networks, in both major metropolitan areas, and despite robust partnerships between law enforcement, social service agencies, and the communities they serve—still—participants expressed reluctance to reach out, as gatekeepers, to those safety networks. In short, such fear generalized not only to participants’ reluctance to reach out to law enforcement personnel, but also to other members of CVE-relevant safety networks (i.e., religious officials, friends, or family members). The predominant reason cited for such reluctance was fear, and the three most-cited sources of that fear, in reference to help-seeking, on behalf of either a friend or family member, were the following:<sup>4</sup>

1. “I could get myself in trouble.”
2. “I could get my friend/family member in trouble.”
3. “I could be identified.”

As with the previous finding, this does not suggest

<sup>4</sup> The frequencies with which these three reasons were cited did not differ significantly from each other ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, these reasons are not listed according to any rank order of importance, or prevalence, in the data

that CVE-relevant safety networks—including initiatives such as community policing—are unimportant. However, it suggests that comprehensive CVE-relevant public safety networks, including community policing initiatives, will fall short of their potential to counter violent extremism, at least, in part, to the extent that gatekeepers remain unwilling to engage with such networks.

## Recommendations

**Circumvent individuals’ fears.** Individuals tend to base decisions on emotional or heuristic (vs. rational/deeply considered) criteria (see Ariely, 2008; Haidt, 2001; Zajonc, 1980). Therefore, one should not expect gatekeepers to overcome their (perhaps well-justified) fears easily, to refer their peers to law enforcement agencies or other social services, however reasonable that decision might seem. Instead, to circumvent gatekeepers’ fears, a more psychologically-grounded strategy would be to offer gatekeepers control over a channel of communication to a relatively neutral, safety-networked organization (i.e., other than law enforcement or intelligence agencies; see “Prospective Piece of the Solution,” for one such suggestion).

**Make the solution convenient.** Individuals tend to “follow the path of least resistance,” in their choices and behaviors (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, p. 83). Therefore, prospective communication channels that aim to connect gatekeepers to CVE-relevant safety networks, should be ones that gatekeepers (youth, especially) are familiar with and accustomed to using. Furthermore, if those communication channels involve the use of technology, they should consist of technologies that are readily available to gatekeepers.

## Prospective Piece of the Solution

One possibility, to bridge the divide between gatekeepers and CVE-relevant safety networks, is based on recent community-based crisis intervention models. Following such innovative models, a texting-based crisis service could be initiated and

promoted for youth to seek help for their peers who might be considering acts of violent extremism. Such a service preserves users’ confidentiality, and—consequently—reduces prospective users’ reluctance to access the service (Evans et al., 2013). Indeed, a similar service was launched (for crisis/suicide prevention), in 2011, in the U.S. state of Nevada, resulting in a remarkable 38% increase in youth utilization of the crisis service (Evans et al., 2013). That equated to approximately 3600 texts, from 137 unique youth texters, *per month* (Evans et al., 2013).

Establishing such a texting-based service, however, should be accompanied by appropriate and focused marketing efforts, including savvy messaging, to attract youth gatekeeper service users. Evans et al. (2013), provide descriptions of inexpensive, effective examples of such marketing materials. Such a service can be relatively inexpensive, and cost-effective if built into a preexisting crisis prevention phone-in hotline (as was done in Nevada; Evans et al., 2013). Though, in Nevada, the texting-based crisis service is interconnected with first responders, including law enforcement, it is not marketed as a crime “tip line,” nor is that its intended function. Instead, the texting service—and, by extension, its primary application for CVE, if so adapted—is to encourage proactive help-seeking for those concerned about those who might be on the verge of committing violence.

## Generalizability

From a strict perspective, the findings from this summary of an ongoing study can generalize only to the population from which they were sampled: individuals willing to volunteer in such research (for modest monetary compensation, or none), from the communities in which they were sampled. However, the psychological basis of the study (i.e., fear of getting one’s self, friends, or family members in trouble with authorities), seems highly unlikely to be unique to the present sample. Therefore, the findings could be expected to generalize to people more broadly. Additionally, the

findings did not appear to be dependent upon a time-sensitive event (e.g., a historical event significantly related to the study’s outcomes). Therefore,

it seems plausible that the findings might generalize into the indefinite future.

## Conclusion

Participants were in consensus regarding their belief that those best positioned to notice early signs of individuals considering acts of violent extremism likely would be those individuals’ friends: perhaps more so than school counsellors, clergy, or family members. Furthermore, participants indicated that the predominant reason, underlying their reluctance to reach out to CVE-relevant service providers, was their fear of the potential repercussions for doing so. Additionally, that fear generalized not only to a reluctance to reach out to law enforcement agencies, but to others within prospective CVE-relevant networks (i.e., religious officials, friends, or family members).

It is encouraging to realize that a potentially powerful ally in the effort to counter violent extremism may be found in peer networks of would-be violent extremists: someone willing to seek help for such individuals. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the remainder of society, not only to build comprehensive CVE-relevant safety networks, but to reduce the barriers between gatekeepers and those networks. Fortunately, as exemplified by the aforementioned texting-based crisis service, a potentially effective piece of the solution is not only cost-effective, but psychologically well-founded. Though cutting-edge, high-tech solutions should be explored for their applications to CVE, the elegant simplicity of a technology as straightforward as texting already offers the potential to empower the critical role of gatekeepers in public safety networks for countering violent extremism. In texting, for example, we have a prospective piece of the solution that is—literally—readily at hand.

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## Developing CVE Programs through Building Community Policing Capacities

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**KEYWORDS:** *countering violent extremism, prevention, intervention, resilience*

To counter violent extremism (CVE), the White House has been advocating a community resilience approach. They stated: “the best defense against terrorist ideologies is strong and resilient individuals and communities” (McDonough, 2011) and “Our best defenses against this threat are well and equipped families, local communities, and institutions” (White House, 2010). One key challenge of CVE is to make these declarations manifest among real world conditions of diverse communities and the law enforcement and government agencies that serve them.

This requires a better understanding of the meanings of resilience in particular U.S. communities under the threat of violent extremism. We conducted research on Somali Americans in Minneapolis St. Paul (Weine & Ahmed, 2012) and asked what would it mean to build resilience to violent extremism in this community, one of the most disadvantage communities in the history of US refugee resettlement. We argued that resilience has to be characterized in relation to risks. Our findings described how risk could be understood not just individually, but as a property of the community and family. We looked at risk from the vantage point of the opportunity structure which is defined as opportunities for behavior that are provided by a given social context. We identified 43 protective resources that could mitigate against those opportunities and built a model called DOVE. This included organizing those protective resources in terms of three prevention goals which corresponded to the opportunity structure of risk for potential involvement in violent extremism. The implication for CVE is that prevention programming should seek to enhance modifiable protective resources that can mitigate against multilevel risks.

The CVE policies currently being implemented in the U.S. involve the following four dimensions:

1. building safe, secure, resilient, crime-resistant communities;
2. training, information sharing, and adopting community-oriented law enforcement approaches;
3. applying community oriented policing practices that focus on building partnerships between law enforcement and communities;
4. fostering community-led preventative programming to build resilience against violent extremist radicalization (White House, 2011).

Our current research focuses on #3 which may be understood as law enforcement’s work to integrate building resilience into their CVE practices through community policing. We are studying the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) innovative work to apply community policing to CVE. In 2008, the LAPD established a “Liaison Section” of its Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau. Deputy Chief Michael Downing, its commander, has described their mission as, “to improve the quality of life and public

safety within diverse communities by building mutual partnerships and trust through coordination and collaboration of all department entities, government stakeholders, public/private/faith-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations with local communities” (LAPD, 2015).

Our study began with these two research questions: 1) How is community policing being applied to CVE and how might it be further enhanced through incorporating psychosocial preventive intervention strategies? 2) How can criminal justice agencies and communities collaboratively develop policies, programs, and initiatives to enhance resilience in communities under threat?

## Methods

This study used ethnographic methods including in-depth interviews and focused-field observations. Focused field observations, involve observations of community policing that focus on activities which are likely to shed light on the research questions (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In-depth interviews conducted with the informant begin with a small number of introductory questions that proceeds in whichever direction that allows the informant to speak most meaningfully to the research questions with concrete and personal details (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). Thus far, we have carried out more than 70 in-depth interviews in Los Angeles with either police officers, community leaders/advocates, parents, or youth (age 18 and above). We have also conducted more than 40 hours of observations. Each interview and observation was transcribed, coded and is being analyzed using Atlas/ti 7.0 (Friese, 2013) to yield particular themes and an overall model using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). At this point we are able to share some preliminary results of the analysis which is still underway, as is data collection.

## Preliminary Results

Based upon the analysis in progress, we have come up with the following provisional findings.

**1. CVE community policing differs from traditional community policing, both structurally and operationally.** CVE community policing is centralized in one unit of 25 officers that covers the entire city,

rather than traditional community policing, which has a Senior Lead Officer in each of 21 divisions. CVE holds one quarterly Muslim Forum rather than 21 monthly Community Police Advisory Boards as part of traditional community policing. This means that CVE community policing is much more diffuse in terms of service to a geographically bound ed community than is traditional community policing.

**2. CVE incorporates both traditional community policing and CVE-oriented community policing components across seven practice domains** (see table 4 at the end of the chapter). We identified both traditional community policing and CVE-oriented components across 7 practice domains (engage, educate, partner, problem solve, risk mitigation, organizational change, measure). Here are illustrative quotations of several different themes (and sub-themes) from the table:

### **Engage (Dialogue & Information Sharing):**

*I believe in breaking bread. That means just sitting down and just eating together. And that diffuses a lot of issues right there. We work on commonalities versus on differences. Tolerance. Acceptance (Community leader, 2014).*

### **Partner (Building Mutual Trust):**

*At the onset, it was pretty rocky, partly because we were approaching communities that have really not been engaged in the past. We are approaching com-*



*munities who look at government in general with kind of a mistrust. Their starting point are international and not necessarily local because these are immigrant communities who are also coming in with their own biases, with their own experiences that don't necessarily translate. So at the onset when we try to bring some of the community groups with the government, it was almost as though they were speaking two completely different languages (city government official, 2014).*

**Organizational Change (Capacity Building):**

*We as organizations that are in our communities should be receiving funding and grant money to work with our communities. All of the people that get grants about us are not us or the organizations of our communities (community leader, 2014).*

**3. Community policing driven partnership is necessary, but not sufficient for CVE.**

Partnership can be regarded as CVE prevention in a conceptual sense in that it makes communities a part of the solution. Partnership allows for division of labor between community, law enforcement, and non-law enforcement (LE) government in undertaking prevention programs. This creates opportunities for communities to be active in aspects of prevention and intervention which law enforcement could not conduct due to constitutional requirements. However, there were needs to go beyond current levels of community policing CVE programming to develop targeted prevention and intervention programs with a sound basis in theory, evidence, and rigorous design.

**4. CVE should include targeted prevention and intervention activities that focus on enhancing modifiable protective resources and risk factors.** One of the LAPD's major partners is the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). MPAC designed "Safe Spaces," an innovative community-led CVE initiative for communities across the

U.S. Safe Spaces aims to increase Muslim-American communities' resilience against violent extremism through community-led prevention and intervention activities ("Safe Spaces", 2014). Safe Spaces is built on the PI model which advocates for: 1) community adoption of social and religious programs that mitigate environmental factors that raise the risk of individuals adopting extremist worldviews, known as "Prevention"; 2) community adoption of multi-disciplinary "Crisis Inquiry Teams" that seek to intervene in situations where an individual is believed to be at risk of engaging in violent behavior, labeled "Intervention." CVE community policing could do more to help develop community-led prevention and intervention, including especially through capacity building of community-based organizations.

**5. Pushback to CVE appears multifactorial, widespread, and dynamic.**

This includes advocacy organizations (CAIR, ACLU, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition) who claim that CVE, "...says that Muslims are more prone to violence than any other faith" (CAIR, 2012). They oppose, "The manufacturing of terror" (Osman, 2013) through surveillance and media. Another source is academics, including" Prof. Sahar Aziz of Texas A&M) who has argued that community policing is "the 'velvet glove' covering the 'iron fist' of more militant styles of policing" (Aziz, 2014). For many community members, CVE: 1) Uses language that is primitive, developing, and not articulated in a clear way to the community; 2) Reinforces negative identities of Muslim Americans; 3) Demonstrates a lack of respect and trust by LE/government; 4) Demonstrates that Muslims aren't being treated as equal citizens; 5) Exacerbates historical trauma from countries of origin; 6) Is based on misinformation spread by media and LE; 7) Endangers civil rights, especially related to surveillance and stings. Those who oppose engagement with LE say that the community does not have an extrem-

ism problem. They believe that the threat of violent extremism is greatly exaggerated by an Islamophobic media and LE agencies who have been *whipping up* informant-centered terrorism cases since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Here are some illustrative quotations of select dimensions of the pushback.

### **The Threat is Exaggerated.**

*A lot of people look at violent extremism as something that is really a media phenomenon. This is something that, you know, we just don't really have. It's not a problem for us and for that reason the media is putting this thing on us. (Community leader, 2014)*

*Because of ISIS etc there is once again a great misunderstanding of Islam throughout the country- what is the government doing on countering this reality and how can we help? (Community leader, 2014).*

### **They Regard Us As Suspects.**

*Government agencies, specifically the FBI, have created*

*more extremists than Al Qaeda and ISIS. FBI exploits these people's sickness to manufacture terrorism cases. We won't work with the government until they stop treating us as suspects. (Community leader, 2014).*

### **The Community has Other Priorities.**

*Even keeping radicalization in mind that's not even Top 10 on the priority list. I would say one for sure is youth leaving Islam. Sometimes you have girls marrying outside of religion. Sometimes you have guys partaking in drugs and end up keeping them away from their religion and just doing their own thing. So I would say losing our youth should be one of our biggest priorities, because if you lose your youth you lose your future (College student, 2014).*

### **Islamophobia Will Kill Us.**

*The Islamophobia industry will kill us if we don't stand up... We need to defend our religion. Everything they do defiles everything that is dear to us. The reality is that there is an Islamophobia industry. We owe it to the Prophet to clear his name (Community leader, 2014).*

## **Discussion**

Based on our preliminary findings, community policing in CVE: 1) Incorporates both traditional community policing and CVE-oriented community policing practices; 2) Plays a vital role in CVE through engaging the community and forming partnerships that pro-actively and mutually build trust, challenge misinformation, educate, promote transparency, defuse conflicts, open communication channels, solve daily problems, and capacity building; 3) Faces new challenges regarding developing targeted prevention and intervention programs, and; 4) Faces strong pushback from the community.

Reflecting on what we studied in Los Angeles and also learned about in other cities, we drafted a **CVE Pyramid Model** (see Figure 2). The figure addresses: Who does it? What must they first do? What should it lead to? The first level depicts the multiple different types of organizations that must be involved, which include law enforcement, non-law enforcement government, and community-based organizations. The middle level depicts how they must first work together through engagement and partnership. The top level depicts specific CVE prevention and intervention activities, which are necessary, but only possible if the first two levels are properly addressed.

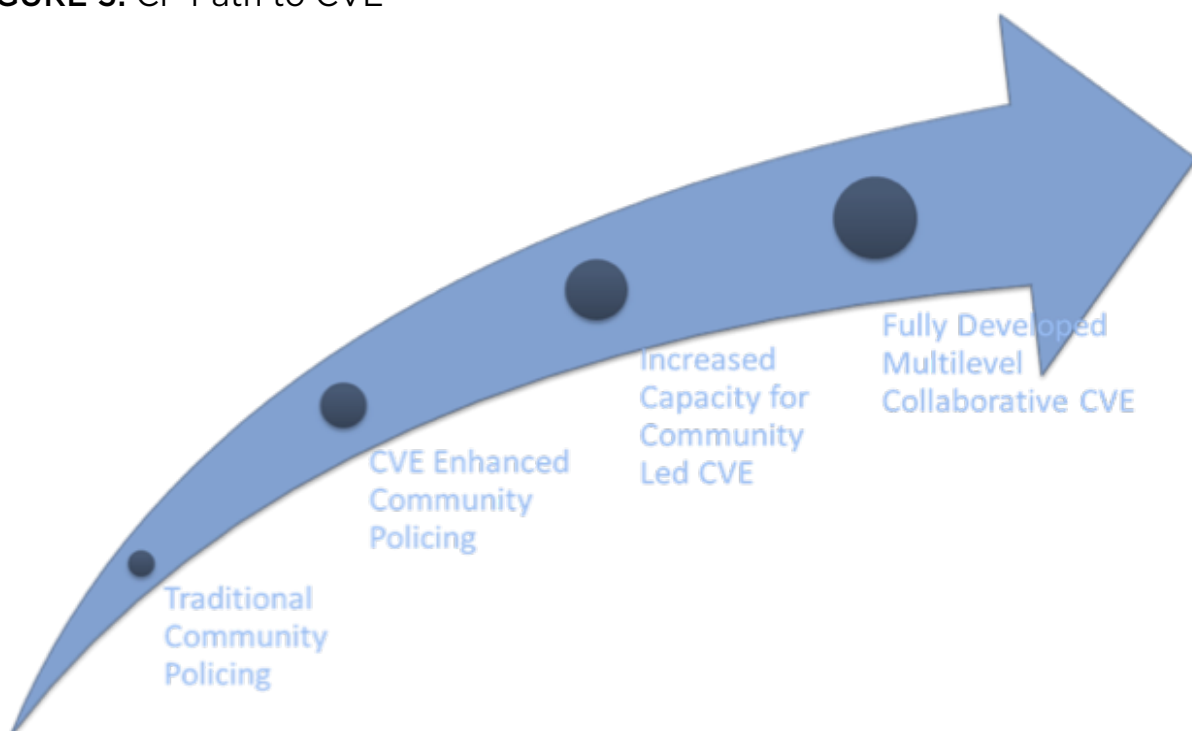
Figure 3 illustrates how community policing can cut a path to CVE. It is certainly not the only path, but it is a path which appears underway in Los Angeles. Other localities, such as Montgomery County, are less focused on community policing per se, and instead more focused on a coalition between county government and faith based organizations (WORDE, 2015). There is no one path to CVE.

On the basis of the preliminary findings we offer three key recommendations for accelerating CVE: 1) Promote the development and evaluation of effective targeted prevention and intervention programs for at-risk individuals & communities through public and private initiatives; 2) Promote the packaging of effective interventions together into multilevel programs that are tailored to fit the local context; 3) Promote

**FIGURE 2: CVE Pyramid Model**



**FIGURE 3: CP Path to CVE**



the assessment of the effectiveness and implementation of CVE initiatives so as to build scientific evidence to support the programs’ sustainability with officials and the public.

However it is also clear that none of these recommendations are likely to succeed unless law enforcement, other government agencies, and communities find productive ways to respond to the pushback to CVE. A critical number of persons completely reject the building resilience to violent extremism narrative because for them the threat is exaggerated and built on a false premise which regarded their community as suspect. The implication of these findings is that there needs to be major changes to CVE, including a reframing that includes: 1) **move** beyond criminal justice approaches to CVE to build a broader approach to community safety that utilizes public health and psychosocial approaches; 2) **shift** to developing healthy, resilient communities that are resistant to a spectrum of violent threats; 3) **expand** beyond a focus on radicalization to violence to a focus on a spectrum of targeted violence inclusive of radicalization to violence, but also other violent threats such as gang violence, workplace violence, hate crimes, and domestic violence; 4) **draw** on the collaborative resources of community members, educators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement.

**TABLE 4:** Traditional CP and CVE oriented CP components across seven practice domains

Practice Domains	Traditional CP Components	CVE-oriented CP Components
Engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet and establish friendly relations with persons of significant influence in their communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focused largely on Muslim American communities, with interfaith involvement</li> <li>Focused on willing and cooperative community leaders</li> </ul>
Educate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote knowledge and awareness of crimes, police work, and community resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote knowledge and awareness of VE &amp; CVE</li> <li>Based on LE practitioner understanding of historical, political, cultural and community factors</li> </ul>
Partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build mutual trust between LE, community service, &amp; advocacy orgs</li> <li>Build interagency collaborations involving LE and non-LE gov</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addresses trust undermined by historical and current traumas</li> <li>Put "money in the bank" for use in addressing future crises</li> </ul>
Problem-Solve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Solve citizens’ daily problems</li> <li>Follow through on promises</li> <li>Defuse conflicts between community and police</li> <li>Proactive joint problem-solving</li> <li>Hosting events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help communities to assess level of risk of persons</li> <li>Inform communities about when it is appropriate to notify law enforcement about individuals at risk</li> </ul>
Risk Mitigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focused on gangs, trafficking, and other urban crime</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance integration of immigrants &amp; refugees</li> <li>Make the environment hostile to violent extremism</li> <li>Encourage the development of community-led prevention and intervention</li> </ul>
Organizational Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build capacities of community orgs/members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build capacity among immigrant/refugee orientation</li> </ul>
Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of emphasis on assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partner with academics with research and evaluation expertise</li> </ul>

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This volume reports on the range of papers presented at the Annual Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Conference 2014 from 7-8 December 2014 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Conference, hosted by Hedayah, Curtin University and People against Violent Extremism (PaVE), provided a platform for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to discuss and disseminate cutting-edge research on countering violent extremism (CVE). The resulting publication begins to fill a gap in the literature related to CVE by providing insights into some of the local push and pull factors that lead to radicalization and recruitment in different contexts, and suggest some policy and programming recommendations to better counter these factors. The essays in this volume also highlight existing programs in countering the narrative of violent extremists, deconstruct programs related to disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration of former violent extremists, and provide case examples of CVE programming at the community level.



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