

# SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 452 | AUGUST 2019

UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

## Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict

By Chris Bosley



Families of ISIS militants walk near the village of Baghouz, Syria, after the group surrendered to Syrian Democratic Forces in March 2019. (Photo by Issam Abdallah/Reuters)

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### Summary

- Communities in dozens of countries face the challenge of repatriating, rehabilitating, and reintegrating thousands of people who traveled to join ISIS.
- This challenge requires an approach that draws on preventing and countering violent extremism, peacebuilding, and public health practices to address the social, structural, and cognitive drivers of violent extremism.
- Prosecution, though often the preferred response, may not be possible or prudent. Motivations vary dramatically, evidence is difficult to obtain, and many returning persons may be victims.
- Children are victims who require developmentally appropriate psychosocial and other forms of support to address their trauma and resocialize them.
- Violent extremism uniquely affects women and sexual and gender minorities. Rehabilitation and reintegration need to be tailored to reflect their unique experiences, motivations, and challenges without categorically treating women—or people of any gender—based on biases or assumptions.
- Rehabilitation and reintegration strategies help minimize the risk of recidivism. Sustained, positive, inclusive community engagement is needed to address cognitive perceptions of marginalization and dehumanization, which can contribute to violent radicalization and recidivism.
- Rehabilitation has focused primarily on individuals, but the inherently social component to reintegration requires building capacity for families and communities to absorb inclusively returning persons. Opening spaces for prosocial engagement between them and community members can foster social learning and reconciliation, build social cohesion, and strengthen resilience.

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the complexity surrounding the rehabilitation and reintegration of people exiting violent extremist conflict, with an emphasis on building capacity for community responses. Based on a series of regional workshops held under the auspices of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the report was supported by the Center for Applied Conflict Transformation at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Peaceworks No. 452. First published 2019.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-773-2



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INSTITUTE OF PEACE  
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Women load their belongings into a truck after being deported from al-Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria.  
(Photo by Ahmed Mardnli/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

## Introduction: A Paradigm Shift

Communities worldwide are facing the challenge of what to do with people returning from living or fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since 2011, more than fifty thousand people from 120 countries have traveled to join ISIS.<sup>1</sup> International success in dismantling ISIS's territorial caliphate has cued up a new challenge as thousands of people formerly affiliated with ISIS attempt to return home or relocate elsewhere; over eight thousand have already done so.<sup>2</sup> Recent media reporting from the liberated areas of Syria bear out that estimate with anecdotal evidence.<sup>3</sup> People exiting violent extremist conflict are not only those who actively engaged in violence: up to 12 percent of the people who traveled to Iraq and Syria were children, who must be considered victims who traveled without agency, and an additional 13 percent were women.<sup>4</sup> While most men and women who traveled to live with ISIS willingly engaged in violence and therefore should be prosecuted and held accountable for their actions, the motivations and activities of those who joined ISIS are diverse. ISIS propaganda was masterful at harnessing neurobiological instincts for recruiting and targeted women and families by promising them they could build a life in what was advertised as an Islamic utopian alternative to decadent Western society.<sup>5</sup> Families lured under false pretenses, women and children taken without agency, children born or adopted in the conflict zone, and people captured or trafficked all present complex challenges and generate an urgent need for rehabilitation and reintegration options, as well as alternatives to detention and incarceration.



For many decades, postconflict reintegration has been approached primarily through the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) framework. Indeed, efforts to reintegrate people exiting violent extremist conflict into local communities can draw important lessons and strategies from the extensive DDR experience. Such lessons include the importance of community participation, social networks, institutions, and families; the need to involve credible local interlocutors and former combatants to lend legitimacy to programs that are most effective when voluntary in nature; a specific need for gender-informed and child-specific programming; and recognition of the limitations of reintegration in the absence of broader social, economic, and political reforms.

Still, violent extremism in many ways stretches the paradigm for reintegration. In addition to some of the same challenges around the need to address trauma, stigma, gender dynamics, child development, justice and reconciliation, and disengagement from violence, reintegration of those formerly associated with violent extremism presents unique challenges of its own. DDR programs often are guided by a formal and widely accepted agreement, relocate former combatants into cleared or postconflict communities, and enjoy support from significant and focused international assistance. Conversely, people disengaging from violent extremism generally enjoy none of these structural supports. Violent extremism is generally a crime in the context of international and domestic law; thus, those who have participated in violent extremist conflict are often subject to criminal justice responses. Furthermore, DDR programs are primarily designed for the narrow category of people who were directly involved in armed conflict; however, rehabilitation and reintegration in the context of ISIS must address an entire society, including not only fighters but also spouses, children, the elderly, and functionaries such as teachers and health care workers. Fundamentally, DDR is approached as a peacebuilding process conducted at the level of group behavior and dynamics, incentivizing cooperation by removing fear of punishment, whereas preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming tends to be approached as a security measure focused on the behavior of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Rehabilitation and reintegration for people exiting violent extremist conflicts must encompass both approaches.

People exiting violent extremist conflict have transformed the nature of both the P/CVE and the DDR challenges: neither demobilization nor individual deradicalization will be sufficient. Rehabilitation and reintegration operate at a level of social complexity that demands a peacebuilding approach, and effective responses require hybrid interventions drawn from both DDR and P/CVE frameworks. Such complexity is compounded in contexts like those faced in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS was not just an insurgent force but also a society with its own system of governance, laws, and norms. Indeed, political and social institutions are sticky, a foundational concept of political development initially observed by political scientist Stephen Krasner: “Institutional structures do not respond in any rapid or fluid way to alterations in the domestic or international environment. Change is difficult.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they are not merely an aggregation of individual choices; rather, they themselves exert a strong influence on the norms absorbed by those who interact with them. Not only are institutions sticky in a physical sense, they are also sticky in that the norms they inculcate are not easily overwritten.<sup>8</sup>

Resocializing those who have internalized the norms of life under ISIS to a different set of political and social institutions and behavioral standards requires long-term engagement. Navigating appropriate responses to their diverse motivations will require the application of tools from several distinct but related areas of research and practice to balance justice and reconciliation with rehabilitation

Efforts focused on recovery to minimize risk and foster long-term sustainability must draw lessons from DDR and conflict resolution processes while also harnessing rehabilitation and reintegration efforts both in and out of detention settings and acknowledging human rights obligations—all while ensuring the safety and security of local communities.

imperatives. These areas include (but are not limited to) criminal justice, social work, and public health. Efforts focused on recovery to minimize risk and foster long-term sustainability must draw lessons from DDR and conflict resolution processes while also harnessing rehabilitation and reintegration efforts both in and out of detention settings and acknowledging human rights obligations—all while ensuring the safety and security of local communities.

The requirement for multistakeholder responses is only one reason why reintegrating those exiting violent extremist conflicts can be complex, however. The reintegration of people exiting such contexts is likely also to be spread among an array of local communities, each with unique ecosystems of social, economic, and political dynamics and institutional capacities. Though armed groups in many conflicts directly involve local communities, and civilians are rarely spared trauma and violence in any form of violent conflict, the explicit targeting of civilians by violent extremist actors demands a greater focus on risk management and security sector involvement than traditional DDR programs typically call for, in addition to mechanisms for achieving restorative justice and reconciliation.

## Two Faces of Justice: Criminal and Social

Justice and reconciliation are important facets of the reintegration process, especially for communities affected by violent extremism. Though in many DDR contexts, amnesty is the primary response for former combatants, UN Security Council resolutions have made clear that in a violent extremist context, prosecution should be a primary response. Just as important, the conventional wisdom that people exiting violent extremist conflict pose an outsized threat owing to their operational experience and extremist networks steeps public opinion in fear, anger, and a desire to stigmatize—despite empirical evidence that this is not the case.<sup>9</sup> Harsh security measures, stigmatizing public discourse, and the revocation of citizenship are politically popular measures, and for this reason those who traveled to join ISIS are primarily processed within a criminal justice paradigm.<sup>10</sup>

Criminal justice for people exiting violent extremist conflict, however, often is fraught with challenges. Prosecution will not always be the preferred option or even possible. In many cases, legal barriers to prosecution may exist. While many countries passed legislation to criminalize travel to a foreign country to support or affiliate with a terrorist group after passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 in 2014, many people had already traveled before there were legal impediments to doing so.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, gathering evidence from a conflict zone or using intelligence in such a way that upholds evidentiary standards while protecting intelligence sources and methods is exceptionally difficult. Military units operating in conflict zones are unsuited to conducting criminal investigations, and transborder information-sharing agreements often do not exist. Both conditions

While prosecution may be the preferred response, the logistical, legal, and structural obstacles to law enforcement mean that a criminal justice response alone will not suffice.

hinder investigations and prosecutions. Even when prosecution is pursued, factors such as lack of evidence or gender biases that assume women take more passive roles—when in fact women play a variety of roles and often are as committed to extremist violence as men are—

may result in judges handing down lenient sentences with little or no prison time involved. And when convictions are won, prison sentences rarely last a lifetime. In Indonesia, for example, 144 people, including four who had traveled to Syria and three more who were detained on their way to Syria, have been released or are scheduled for release between 2017 and 2019.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the capacity to investigate, prosecute, and detain the sheer numbers of people exiting violent extremist conflict may not exist in countries such as Tunisia, where the nearly one thousand people expected to return could overwhelm the justice system.<sup>13</sup> It is clear, then, that while prosecution may be the preferred response, the logistical, legal, and structural obstacles to law enforcement mean that a criminal justice response alone will not suffice.

The politically expedient solution has been to revoke citizenship for those returning from the so-called caliphate to avoid the responsibility of repatriating them. While such actions may yield short-term political gains, they trade away long-term security and the ability to provide justice, and the moral and human rights dimensions are complex. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees a person's right to nationality and prohibits the arbitrary revocation of citizenship, and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness recognizes only a narrow set of circumstances in which the deprivation of citizenship can lead to statelessness. Revoking citizenship for terrorist offenses—even when such an action will render a person stateless—may be considered legally permissible, even if not always prudent.<sup>14</sup>

Already, many thousands of people who traveled to live or fight with ISIS have been rendered effectively stateless, amounting to an additional level of trauma on top of an already enormous humanitarian crisis. With their identification and travel documents destroyed or confiscated by ISIS, many thousands of people—including those who were lured, coerced, or forced to travel against their will, as well as those who willingly joined and participated—have been consigned to camps, prisons, makeshift settlements, and ad hoc communities. In fact, denying reentry to a citizen returning from violent extremist conflict simply relocates the problem at best. At worst, it sets the problem aside to address at a later date, when it may have become more dangerous.

Justice is foundational to the rule of law, and it is a fundamental democratic principle that citizens accused of crimes should be tried in a court of law by a jury of their peers. However, camps housing refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) lack the capacity and structures to provide this kind of justice.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly the case in Syria, where such camps in ISIS-liberated areas are under the jurisdiction of a nonstate actor, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. States that lack the capacity or will to identify their nationals and facilitate their return deny their citizens basic services necessary to access justice and to facilitate their rehabilitation and eventual reintegration.<sup>16</sup> Security too is foundational to the rule of law, and some people returning from life with ISIS pose real risks or harbor violent intentions. But here, too, refugee and IDP camps and ad hoc communities almost certainly lack the capacity to monitor or rehabilitate people to minimize those risks. Without the

capacity to regulate activities, the closed social environments of detention, refugee, and IDP camps risk becoming incubators for uninhibited violent radicalization of a transnational cohort of people.

Australia, the United Kingdom, and many other states rationalize denationalization by exercising that option only in the cases of persons with dual citizenship. Such a policy faces its own challenges, however. Because those with dual citizenship likely are immigrants or children of immigrants, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights notes, it risks perpetuating perceptions of marginalization that may have contributed to violent radicalization to begin with.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, considerations should include ensuring the individual in question retains at least one nationality to uphold his or her fundamental human rights. Thus, implementing such a policy requires cooperation with the country of shared citizenship. States should consider the context in the other country to avoid overwhelming the capacity of the person's ultimate destination or contributing to the violation of other human rights, such as occurs with torture or other inhumane and degrading treatment.<sup>18</sup> This is an especially acute concern because the definition of terrorism is inconsistent and varies across countries; in some countries its definition can be used as a political tool to justify circumventing the rights that citizenship would otherwise protect.<sup>19</sup> Denying repatriation fails to address the problem and is more likely to consign individuals at risk of perpetrating extremist violence to conditions where the capacity to rehabilitate or monitor them is lacking. Worse, it may subject them to the grievous human rights abuses practiced by some countries under the guise of counterterrorism. Because of the justice, security, and globally interconnected humanitarian issues at stake, stripping citizenship favors short-term domestic political gain that, in the long term, leads to a counterproductive policy.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- States whose nationals have traveled to fight or live with ISIS should proactively engage with NGOs operating in the region, detention centers, and refugee camps to identify citizens and provide support for repatriation.
- In light of the challenges inherent in prosecuting many people exiting violent extremist conflict, national and local authorities should develop mechanisms for achieving restorative justice and programs for reconciliation.

### VICTIMS NOT TIME BOMBS: CHILDHOOD RESOCIALIZATION

The pathology of those who lived or fought with ISIS is complex. Indeed, owing to the genocidal and terrorist nature of ISIS, even those who traveled against their will may have carried out atrocities and crimes.<sup>20</sup> It is unlikely that many individuals will fall neatly into a binary victim-or-perpetrator category, and responses will struggle to reflect that victim and perpetrator may coexist in the same person. Despite the activities they may have participated in while in conflict zones, children exiting violent extremist conflict are children first. Indeed, children could be victims of violations of international law prohibiting their recruitment into armed groups, as well



Children look through holes in a tent at al-Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria in April 2019.  
(Photo by Ali Hashisho/Reuters)

as victims of human trafficking, violence, and trauma. In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and because they are victims without agency, their best interests should form the foundation for responding to their return.

Children who have been raised in conflict and socialized with violent extremist propaganda and norms present a particular and long-term risk, as socialization during developmental ages can inculcate behaviors and attitudes strongly. And whereas child soldiers in more traditional forms of conflict generally are prevented from accessing educational services, children who lived with ISIS have a vastly different experience. As a proto-state, ISIS provided its children with a religious education that doubled as a recruitment and indoctrination mechanism to engender a sense of pride in embracing ISIS ideals.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as the Global Counterterrorism Forum noted, children raised in violent extremist conflict “may have been exposed to violence, may have been victims of violence, and may have perpetrated violent acts, making trauma [a] particularly acute” concern as their trauma may manifest as unique behavioral challenges.<sup>22</sup> ISIS forced children to participate in executions, combat training, and even frontline violence from an early age.<sup>23</sup> Investments in psychosocial intervention and trauma first aid training for those with regular contact with returning children, can help prepare them to respond to behavioral



Children's programs might approach rehabilitation through the lens of resocialization rather than deradicalization, collaborating strongly with existing social work programs and focusing on developing critical thinking skills, social intelligence, and empathy.

and emotional expressions of traumatic experiences.<sup>24</sup> In Nigeria, for example, the NEEM Foundation provides psychological and mental health services for children under the age of fourteen who have been affected by Boko Haram. The foundation provides mobile, community-based services to address trauma and train community members in counseling techniques, and operates a training center to reach communities not serviced otherwise.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the character of socialization under ISIS, treatment is expected to be more effective—and more appropriate—when it reflects children's mental and intellectual development rather than their age alone. Programs that consider and account for children's developing cognitive abilities, capacities, and vulnerabilities likely will be more successful at fostering prosocial behavior and could accelerate rehabilitation.<sup>26</sup> Such programs might approach rehabilitation through the lens of resocialization rather than deradicalization, collaborating strongly with existing social work programs and focusing on developing critical thinking skills, social intelligence, and empathy.<sup>27</sup> In Pakistan's Swat Valley, the Sabaoon Rehabilitation Center provides psychosocial support for the rehabilitation of adolescent males who had fought with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The model emphasizes prosocial activities with families and local communities and the acquisition of cognitive, social, and vocational skills that enable the youths to more easily adjust to society and replace their violent identities with new ones.<sup>28</sup>

Resocialization is particularly important for children exiting violent extremist conflict, as trauma healing is most effective once “normalcy” has been established. Educational systems have an important role to play in facilitating perceptions of a state of normalcy. Instruction that emphasizes and promotes an appreciation for diversity may be an effective means of resocializing returning children and of preventing stigma from being attached to them by providing prosocial interaction. Such experience in Croatia demonstrates the effectiveness of training teachers to implement psychosocial programming and involving them in the rehabilitation process. The Nansen Dialogue Center and the Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency partner to conduct joint activities and lessons with students in twenty-three predominantly Croat schools and children from other ethnicities. The model has proven successful at challenging exclusionary norms and socializing children to the value of diversity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as the Global Counterterrorism Forum points out, “Education systems can instill values, skills, and tools necessary for resilient communities and individuals by shaping [self identity and] citizenship”—not only for children but for entire families.<sup>30</sup>

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- Emphasizing prosocial activities with community members and families, where appropriate, helps instill a sense of belonging.

# Global Counterterrorism Forum's Good Practices

## Responding to Returning Children

Approach child returnees in accordance with professional assessments of each child's development and prioritize the child's best interests.

Consider diversion mechanisms and alternatives to incarceration when prosecuting children.

Approach rehabilitation and reintegration programming for children through a lens of socialization and education to promote disengagement from violence and prosocial behavior.

## Responding to Returning Women and Girls

Develop gender-informed responses and incorporate gender dynamics into rehabilitation and reintegration programming for women and girls.

Leverage the unique role of women as local community influencers and family leaders in local programming.

## The Roles of Families and Communities

Involve local stakeholders to understand and take into account the unique context existing in local communities.

Take proactive measures to build social cohesion and resilient local communities with the capacity to absorb the reintegration of returnees.

Recognize the diversity of returning families and avoid identifying responses with any particular religion, culture, ethnic group, nationality, or race. These measures can help reduce the stigma attached to returning families.

**Source:** Global Counterterrorism Forum, "Good Practices on Addressing the Challenge of Returning Families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 2018.

## (NOT JUST) BRIDES OF ISIS: GENDERED DYNAMICS

Violent extremism often follows strict gender norms, limiting the activities of women and sexual and gender minorities associated with such organizations. Many people who lived under the control of ISIS were denied basic human rights. Enslavement of women and girls was common, rape and physical abuse were sanctioned punishments even for young girls, social interactions between foreign women and nonrelative men were severely controlled, privileges such as access to health care were rationed as rewards for women, and ISIS targeted men who had sex with men for execution.<sup>31</sup>

These kinds of gender-based violence imposed trauma-related mental health and medical needs beyond those inherent in living in a conflict zone. They can also amplify the stigma they face. In fundamentalist societies with uncompromising attitudes toward gender issues, people who are victims of sexual violence may be blamed, shamed, and further stigmatized by family and community members. Furthermore, in traditional communities, stigma may result from perceptions that women transgressed normative gender roles by participating in conflict. Not only will such stigma further alienate women, preventing prosocial community engagement to

challenge perceptions of marginalization that may have contributed to the original violent radicalization, it can also impose outsized economic burdens on them.<sup>32</sup> Though recent estimates indicate that approximately 16 percent of people who traveled to live or fight with ISIS have returned home or relocated elsewhere, only 8 percent of women who traveled have returned.<sup>33</sup> Much of this disparity might be attributed to women having given birth to children while in conflict zones; these mothers face obstacles to traveling and reentering their country of citizenship with undocumented children. Many of these women are also widows who may need to become the primary income-earner for their family. The stigma against them in communities with restrictive gender roles, in addition to the trauma in communities that have experienced abusive behavior from security forces, may reduce their capacity to care for their families and preclude meaningful rehabilitation or social integration.<sup>34</sup> The University of Indonesia's Police Research Center offers an example of how to address these problems. A program intended to aid and empower the wives of people incarcerated for violent extremism-related offenses provides the women with the training needed to transform their existing income-generating activities into businesses that can sustain themselves and their families.<sup>35</sup>

However, women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities cannot be assumed to be victims. While in some cases they may have been trafficked into the conflict zone, forced or coerced to travel, in most cases their status cannot be reduced to the binary option of victim or perpetrator. Those who were coerced to travel may have perpetrated violent crimes while in the conflict zone; those who joined ISIS of their own accord may have become disillusioned; even those who remain loyal to ISIS may be victims of violence themselves. Specifically, women should not be assumed to have played a passive or auxiliary role while in the conflict zone. In fact, women play diverse roles in violent extremist organizations.<sup>36</sup> As their traditional roles in many communities include regular interaction with adolescents, women play a vital role in the violent radicalization process, both in local communities and online.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as ISIS began to reel from dwindling numbers, women took on more active and violent roles, policing ISIS norms of morality in all-female fighter brigades and even functioning as suicide bombers.<sup>38</sup> Even when women traveled voluntarily into violent extremist conflict, however, they often did so with motivations distinct from people of other genders. Whereas ISIS targeted the recruitment of men primarily by appealing to violence and shame at not participating, recruitment propaganda aimed at women typically offered the potential for empowerment in situations where women could exercise agency inspired by "Islamic" ideals with other like-minded women.<sup>39</sup> As Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini and Melinda Holmes have noted, ISIS offered "a sense of purpose, meaning and belonging that vulnerable women and girls [were] missing in their lives."<sup>40</sup>

Just as ISIS's recruiting practices systematically focused on women, rehabilitation programs must address their separate motivations and experiences in ways that are designed specifically to align with gender dynamics and individual attitudes. Especially in conflict-affected communities facing the integration of people exiting violent extremist conflict, it is important that rehabilitation programs address misogynistic behaviors, attitudes, and values associated with masculinity. Channeling masculine behaviors into more peaceful conceptions, or understanding the power dynamics involved in a person's multitude of identities as a way to encourage prosocial roles, can ensure violence does not become normalized.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, marginalizing militant

conceptions of masculinity can encourage help-seeking behavior among men, which can help prevent the revictimization of those who were subjected to gender-based violence while in conflict, especially in communities that have experienced historical injustices and abuses by the security sector. Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security Africa is a Kenyan organization that builds trust between women and local law enforcement officers, including the perpetrators of gender-based violence. The organization involves community members and police officers in workshops on the role of women in P/CVE and women's experiences with violence.<sup>42</sup>

Increasing the agency of women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities by addressing restrictive masculine gender norms can be an effective way to combat violent extremist recruitment tactics that, in the words of Naraghi-Anderlini and Holmes, target the “injustice and deficit in dignity that women [and others] experience in their own societies.”<sup>43</sup> Though women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities experience conflict and violent extremism differently from men and boys, and though ISIS tailored its appeals to women differently from its appeals to men, each individual, regardless of gender identity, will have personal experiences and motivations. A gendered lens for conflict analysis is vital for understanding each individual's unique experiences and motivations, to ensure that rehabilitation and reintegration programs informed by those are available. It is also vital to ensure that no group of people are bunched together and treated as a category but instead that individuals are treated in accordance with their own individual needs, experiences, and motivations.

Women should be viewed not just as victims and perpetrators but also as rescuers.<sup>44</sup> Women are critical stakeholders in the reintegration of people disengaging from violent extremism, and mainstreaming gender and gender dynamics into policy and programming improves the design, implementation, and evaluation of those efforts. Involving female teachers, community and faith leaders, and women who have themselves disengaged from violent extremism can enhance the success of these efforts.<sup>45</sup> Developing and promoting women's networks to allow women to support women and expanding the role and support of women-led organizations and civil society actors have proven to be effective ways to increase the agency of local women in highlighting idiosyncratic dynamics, identifying solutions, and empowering other women influencers.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- While gender dynamics must be reflected, response plans should avoid treating women and sexual and gender minorities categorically or monolithically. Gender-informed support should be layered upon the unique experiences, motivations, and challenges of each individual.
- Trust between women and authorities must be built, and misogynist norms addressed, to avoid the revictimization of women.



# Rehabilitation and Reintegration: Harm Reduction for Disengagement from Violent Extremism

Rehabilitation outside the criminal justice context must balance two, sometimes competing imperatives: minimizing the risks that people exiting violent extremist conflict might pose and providing the care they need to reintegrate as productive members of society. In this way, rehabilitation and reintegration programs draw from a similar logic as proven harm reduction approaches to highly stigmatized public health issues such as drug use, sex work, and alcohol consumption. Like harm reduction policies, community-based rehabilitation and reintegration programs support both those who have bypassed the criminal justice sector (or have completed their sentence) and the communities and environments in which they live. Such programs acknowledge that there is no perfect solution by offering pragmatic support to people disengaging from violent extremism and building resilience in communities affected by them. Bottom-up, people-first approaches (rather than top-down policies) build bridges to and for those needing support, providing easy-to-access avenues for rehabilitation support and services to promote reintegration into local communities.<sup>46</sup>

## PEOPLE FIRST: STRUCTURAL, SOCIAL, AND COGNITIVE DRIVERS

Such approaches reflect the idea that rehabilitation must transcend the more linear deradicalization paradigm of ideological and theological reeducation by addressing the entire ecosystem that contributed to violent radicalization. Conventional deradicalization efforts engage religion for its ideological value to offer alternative interpretations of religious texts and doctrines to convince people to reject extremist views. While religious and ideological interpretations certainly can provide justification for violent extremism to some individuals, the driving factors of violent extremism in societies usually proceed in nonlinear, complex ways that involve the interaction of structural, social, and cognitive factors.<sup>47</sup>

Recent studies on the neuroscience of violent radicalization have shown that social exclusion and marginalization can increase the salience of “sacred values” that members of an in-group are willing to fight and die for.<sup>48</sup> When such values fail to align with the perceived values of a broader society, they can contribute to “othering,” framing different social groups as assaulting those values and generating a view wherein society is a threat to one’s identity. Neuroscience has also shown that perceived threats to group identity activate the same cognitive reactions as threats to physical safety, dehumanizing the “other” and removing neurobiological inhibitions to deploying violence.<sup>49</sup>

However, reducing violent radicalization to feelings of alienation and identity is deceptively simplistic, as numerous factors can contribute to social marginalization and identity crises. Victimization, trauma, and human needs for significance and respect that can increase perceptions of alienation interact with grievances such as relative deprivation, corruption, injustice, denial of agency, inequity, systemic discrimination and state predation, oppression, and poor



Former Islamic State members play a game of chess at the Syrian Center for Combating Extremist Ideology in Marea, a town in the northeastern part of Syria. (Photo by Khalil Ashawi/Reuters)

governance to form a narrative justifying the dehumanization of society, which is validated by a network of ideologically compatible extremists.<sup>50</sup> Violent radicalization occurs as the result of a complex system; it is multifactoral and contextually driven, including both the context of the individual and the context of the environment. Accordingly, a more comprehensive engagement that

includes religious institutions for their social function as civil society leaders and influencers could be more effective at addressing the ecosystems that generate violent extremism.<sup>51</sup> The Dutch approach explicitly targets “social polarization” as a key factor in violent radicalization, empowering local municipalities to address “social malfunction” by emphasizing cohesion. In Slotervaart, the local government engages local imams to highlight common interests and goals, organize interfaith activities, and facilitate greater social cohesion. The strategy in Rotterdam uses subsidies for community service organizations (CSOs) to sponsor events and activities that include municipal authorities and community members across faith divides to encourage integration.<sup>52</sup>

Rehabilitation and reintegration for those disengaging from violent extremism is a complex psychosocial process that must address people first as unique individuals with unique needs across multiple dimensions. Designing such comprehensive programming tailored to the individual requires multiple levels of analysis by governments and stakeholders that merge technical expertise with local wisdom and capacity. The resulting strategies will often require a suite of support programs, including not only religious reeducation but also continued mental health and psychosocial support, skills building, basic education, health care, employment assistance, legal assistance, economic support, social support, local community dialogues and outreach, reconciliation and restorative justice mechanisms, and monitoring and evaluation to identify when a course correction is needed. In Denmark, the city of Aarhus developed a comprehensive system that institutionalizes partnerships among schools, social services, CSOs, and the police. As of 2017, this system had processed sixteen people returning from violent extremist conflict in Syria. Participants undergo an initial risk assessment, followed by an individually tailored rehabilitation process for the individual and his or her family that includes mentorship, housing and economic support, medical treatment, mental health

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and psychosocial support, and periodic risk assessment. As of 2017, the program had not experienced a single case of recidivism.<sup>53</sup>

While such whole-of-society approaches have shown promise, they require a tremendous amount of capacity and resources to implement effectively, and may be impossible to implement on a larger scale. In places such

as Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia, for example, that are faced with responding to hundreds or thousands—not dozens—of people exiting violent extremist conflict, such an approach may be an unachievable ideal. In these cases, early engagement to prepare communities and families to address the psychosocial needs of returning persons; build capacity, trust, resilience, and cohesion to enable reconciliation and prosocial engagement; and empower CSOs and community leaders to work with the people returning is paramount.

In all cases, however, rehabilitation and reintegration will require cooperation among a broad cadre of partners. Nonetheless, there is no single model or universal constellation of partnerships that can be applied across all contexts. Including local stakeholders in the development of localized strategies can enable authorities to map the concerns present and approach communities with a plan tailored to the local dynamics, informed by local understanding of social norms, community relationships, and cultural traditions.

Some families and communities might be resistant to reintegration programs out of fear and stigma. Here it is important to understand the underlying causes of stigma and to engage with credible community leaders to encourage inclusive interactions and social learning to break down stigma and generate community buy-in. The use of people-first language could help shape perceptions and facilitate an environment that is welcoming of a shift in identity away from violence, but longer-term grassroots outreach will still be necessary to change attitudes.<sup>54</sup> Others may hesitate to engage with authorities out of fear that such engagement will result in legal action against a returning family member. Training programs to increase the capacity and knowledge of families who are receiving returning family members can help assuage these concerns and prepare families for what they might encounter. Such training could include how to transform the interpersonal conflicts they might face, as people exiting violent extremist conflict will almost certainly be different from when they left.

Still other families and communities, especially those in conflict-affected societies, may not have interest in or the capacity for rehabilitation. In such cases, broader violence prevention efforts may be needed. Among the practices recommended by the Global Counterterrorism Forum are adopting conflict mitigation strategies, encouraging nonviolent alternatives, and building the capacity of political institutions, the inclusivity of governance, and the accountability of authorities to address the grievances that have driven violent radicalization.<sup>55</sup> Contextually specific engagement with local communities using conflict management tools and approaches can change attitudes, relationships, and structures to build resilience to violent extremism.<sup>56</sup>

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- Communities should invest in trauma literacy training in communities faced with significant numbers of returnees to encourage help-seeking and prosocial behavior among people exiting violent extremist conflict.
- In communities where people exiting violent extremist conflict are concentrated, safe and trusted locations should be established where access to training and mental health and psychosocial support can be provided to those who do not enter the formal education or employment sectors.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE: TRUST, STIGMA, AND RESILIENCE

Because of the broad array of community outreach efforts and the extensive community participation needed for communities to reintegrate people disengaging from violent extremism, an approach focused on the individual is necessary but insufficient: rehabilitation and reintegration programs are most effective when they are right-sized for each community. Outreach efforts should begin well before people exiting violent extremist conflict return home. Communities that have been affected by extremist violence, particularly those in the conflict zone that are struggling to design appropriate responses for their people detained in camps, may require the development of restorative justice and reconciliation mechanisms.

A sense of belonging and social support are key ingredients of any rehabilitation program. Collaboration between local communities and detention, refugee, and IDP camps in the conflict zone is vital to beginning the rehabilitation process for people who are detained but may eventually return to their home communities. As communities try to design effective programs, they will need to avoid perceptions of rewarding people exiting violent extremist conflict for their behavior. In some communities in Somalia, employing people disengaging from violent extremism to repair infrastructure that had been damaged by al Shabaab has shown to be effective at mitigating resentment.<sup>57</sup> Effective programming for reintegration and rehabilitation must be, as Naraghi-Anderlini and Holmes write, “anchored, owned and beneficial to the wider community.”<sup>58</sup>

Regardless of the distinctions that exist among a diverse range of local contexts, the active participation of key community actors and family members is key to rehabilitation and reintegration. Family members are often the first point of contact for people exiting violent extremist conflict. Programs should thus engage families directly to provide them with support and prepare them to handle the behavioral and social challenges associated with caring for a person who has experienced severe trauma, potentially both as a victim and as a perpetrator of violence. Reintegration presents many challenges. A major problem is that people exiting violent extremist conflict might eschew formal support mechanisms designed to be sensitive and responsive to trauma. In such cases, families can provide a social network and economic support that could ease the rehabilitation process. In Germany, the Hayat program supported by the German Federal Office for Immigration and Refugee



Affairs positions itself as a “shield” between people exiting violent extremist conflict, on the one hand, and their families and the authorities on the other.<sup>59</sup> Hayat works directly with families of people disengaging from violent extremism, providing counseling, advice, training, and other support to foster prosocial engagement with returning persons to ease the process of reintegration.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, while reconnecting returning people with their families may be beneficial to the rehabilitation process, programs should not assume that the family and family environment will not present a source of ongoing violent radicalization. Furthermore, the capacity of many families to assist in rehabilitation may be limited because of the challenges they face in processing the stigma and shame that may be associated with having a family member linked to violent extremism.<sup>61</sup>

Still, family involvement absent broader community engagement is insufficient. This is especially true in fragile contexts, where local communities often must take a leading role when state capacity is lacking. Enlisting local communities to assist with rehabilitation and reintegration requires building bonds of trust and treating them as partners rather than as informants. This can be an extraordinarily difficult task in communities that have historically experienced injustices from security actors and state institutions, but it is nonetheless a vital task. In Nepal and elsewhere, the US Institute of Peace’s Justice and Security Dialogue brought together an inclusive cohort of community members and local police to discuss human security concerns, promote cooperation, and “bridge the gulf of mistrust between the civilian police and local communities.”<sup>62</sup> A similar process could be adapted for communities affected by people exiting violent extremist conflict to assure community members their security concerns are taken into account.

In cases where institutional capacity is low and social grievances against authorities run high, CSOs often have the trust of and contact with affected individuals and communities when government authorities do not. Thus, civil society often is the bridge for reintegration programs to access communities. In the central Sulawesi region of Indonesia, the Institute for Strengthening Civil Society provides an example of how local CSOs can “act as interlocutors in helping to change perceptions on rehabilitation and reintegration” by organizing workshops and discussions to educate communities about people exiting violent extremist conflict.<sup>63</sup> Such a position is a precarious one for CSOs, however, as their effectiveness is tied to their perceived legitimacy in the community. Perceptions of inappropriate CSO alliances with government authorities can undermine the CSOs’ position and alienate communities further. To effectively represent the community while also partnering with government, CSOs need independence, legal latitude, and policy space to interact with people who may have connections to those engaged with extremist violence.<sup>64</sup>

Of course, the onus of building trust with local communities cannot be placed entirely on CSOs. Governments at all levels, from national to municipal, can signal honesty by approaching communities with transparency about the roles and responsibilities expected from each partner, how information will be used, and what information can and cannot be shared with community members. Government authorities must also demonstrate that engagement is not solely to monitor security threats but also to benefit communities for their own sake. It is vital in these efforts to avoid the instrumentalization or militarization of partners such as women, educators, religious leaders, or CSOs. By approaching them with sincere concern for their partners’ needs and those of the community, authorities can demonstrate sensitivity to the power dynamics and disparities involved and begin to foster the goodwill with communities necessary to support rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

Not only will engaging communities for their own benefit build trust and empower them to provide direct services that the state cannot, it can also build social cohesion, which in turn can help generate a sense of belonging and address parts of the environment, and potentially some of the drivers, that gave root to a person's initial radicalization. While environments that foster violent radicalization are complex systems, inclusive communities that are steeped in an appreciation of diversity have the capacity to offer a sense of belonging without stigmatizing people who were formerly involved in extremist violence. In Indonesia, for example, the Institute for International Peace Building provides employment in restaurants for people disengaging from violent extremism. The work opportunity is designed to provide prosocial interactions with local community members and foster a sense of purpose and social belonging.<sup>65</sup>

Efforts to build social cohesion and foster reconciliation take time to gain traction, however, especially in communities with significant grievances or that have been affected by extremist violence. In many communities, the stigmatizing of people who have participated in extremist violence can be severe. While the atrocities committed by terrorists are well known, stigma is often driven more by fear and anger stoked by politicians and the media. In many cases, such as in communities in Tunisia and across the Western Balkans, stigma is felt not only by returning persons but also by family members who remained in their home countries. In such environments, remedial measures, such as antidiscrimination training, masculinity programming, increasing inclusivity on the part of social and political institutions, and demonstrations of prosocial behavior, may gradually reduce stigma. In Indonesia, the group Civil Society Against Violent Extremism has found that engagement with local media outlets has been successful at reducing stigma by sharing returnees' perspectives and giving community members the opportunity to ask questions.<sup>66</sup>

Local CSOs and partners involved in developing the reintegration program can help determine the most relevant means of socializing local communities to the need for reintegration to reduce the stigma borne by those associated with and affected by violent extremism. They can identify respected and trusted local community leaders sensitive to the legitimate concerns of the community—including how security will be maintained—to communicate with the community, impart legitimacy, and reduce stigma. Encouraging participation across the entire community in programs (while excluding from involvement ethnocentric groups) can raise awareness and foster interactions to enable social learning. Community dialogue channels can bridge complex social identities to facilitate the acknowledgment of common ground, and restorative justice mechanisms can begin to reconcile social divides by giving voice to victims and communities. Such efforts at creating common ground and restorative justice are vital to enabling communities to open themselves up to the reintegration of people disengaging from violent extremism.<sup>67</sup>

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- Conflict analysis and community-based research can help map local ecosystems to ensure programs are tailored to existing social dynamics and risk environments.
- Efforts to reduce stigma can generate open spaces for prosocial engagement, facilitate social learning, and foster reconciliation.
- Community buy-in can be generated and stigma reduced by engaging community leaders, public dialogue institutions, and media outlets to socialize the need for rehabilitation and reintegration programs to minimize risks.

## Flipping the Script: A Focus on Communities

Most responses to people exiting violent extremist conflict have focused on the individuals themselves, but the challenge is more systemic than that. Violent extremism is shaped by “risk environments” in which individuals, social dynamics, and political structures interact nonlinearly to increase or mitigate the chances of violent radicalization. When people exiting violent extremist conflict return to the very milieu in which they were initially radicalized to violence, P/CVE, peacebuilding, and public health efforts merge. Framed in such a way, rehabilitation programs that borrow from harm reduction approaches to minimize risk and build community capacity shift “the *focus for change* from individuals alone to the social situations and structures in which they find themselves. . . . They draw attention to [violent extremism] as the manifestation of *system* rather than aggregated individual-level effects.”<sup>68</sup>

Traditional deradicalization programs tend to draw from a more parsimonious “push-pull” paradigm of violent radicalization that neatly organizes drivers of violent radicalization into categories. Such a conception fails to take into account how events at different levels imbricated in risk contexts affect one another. By reconceptualizing violent radicalization as a product of lived experience in a particular environment, rehabilitation programs can target the structural and social conditions, as well as the individual cognitive factors, to cultivate community resilience to violent extremism by generating “social capital, informal support, solidarity and belonging.”<sup>69</sup> Shifting the burden from deradicalization of the individual to systemic rehabilitation by localizing and targeting some of the social and structural drivers can minimize the risk of recidivism for people exiting violent extremist conflict by challenging cognitive perceptions used to justify violent extremism.<sup>70</sup> Rehabilitation programs undertaken without a broader effort to address the ecosystem that contributes to violent radicalization is unsustainable. Community resilience and social cohesion are nonnegotiable to successfully rehabilitate and inclusively reintegrate people exiting violent extremist conflicts.

# Notes

The author would like to thank Desmond Jordan, Mike Darden, Leanne Erdberg, Georgia Holmer, and two anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions that dramatically improved this report.

1. Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019): 31; and Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence, *Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families* (Brussels: European Commission, July 2017), 6.
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4. Figures are cited in Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State* (London: International Centre of the Study of Radicalisation, 2018), 4.

This report uses the term "violent extremist conflict" to highlight the unique nature of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, but it also applies to conflicts elsewhere. These conflicts infuse traditional sectarian conflict with violent extremist features. Resolving such hybrid conflicts requires an approach that fuses a peacebuilding ethos to address social drivers with security and stabilization measures, a public health approach to community risk environments and individual rehabilitation, and law enforcement policies to provide justice for the criminal nature of violent extremism.

Given the contributions of identity, alienation, and dehumanization in violent radicalization; the role of prosocial behavior in rehabilitation; and the neurological power of language to shape perceptions, this report is deliberate in its use of language to avoid further stigmatization and encourage an open space for social learning. Borrowing from public health, social work, and criminal justice practices to address stigma, this report places the person before the label—such as people disengaging from violent extremism—to avoid reinforcing identities steeped in past acts of violence for both individuals and communities while acknowledging the action to facilitate reconciliation.

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