PEACEWORKS

Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation
A PEACEBUILDING APPROACH
By Chris Bosley

PEACEWORKS

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report presents a framework with which peacebuilders can foster disengagement from violent extremism and reconciliation between those disengaging and affected communities by examining the individual, social, and structural dynamics involved. One of a series, the report was supported by the Center for Applied Conflict Transformation at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Frydenlund, a middle-class residential area on the outskirts of Aarhus, Denmark, is home to a number of men who fought for the Islamic State group in Syria, on December 8, 2014. (Photo by Jan Grarup/New York Times)

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Contents

Summary

Disengagement from violent extremism is inherently social and behavioral. Rather than changing beliefs, ideologies, and worldviews, it involves rejecting violence as a way to resolve conflict, express grievances, or pursue a goal. Peacebuilding tools offer opportunities to contribute to disengagement by fostering reconciliation and addressing complex dynamics across individual, social, and structural dimensions. The framework for disengagement that this report presents is a deliberately noncontextualized ethos to guide the development of locally tailored programs and policies from a constellation of principles.

Although violent extremism is only one of a host of social challenges that result from similar drivers and risk factors, the dominant approaches to it since 2001 have been largely defined by law enforcement and security imperatives that have exceptionalized it. Decades of public and behavioral health practice have developed successful strategies to reduce harm from high-risk behaviors and prevent violence. Decades of psychology, sociology, and criminology research shed light on why and how people voluntarily exit groups, including violent and ideological ones such as gangs and cults. These bodies of knowledge underscore that routinized prosocial interactions between those disengaging and community members and institutions are key to building relationships, generating social bonds, and promoting a sense of belonging.

Disengagement and reconciliation is a two-way street that involves not only lowering barriers to prosocial behavior in the individual but also opening spaces for such engagement in affected communities. Although no clinical or diagnosable pathology definitively identifies a terrorist, healing trauma and addressing other mental and behavioral health challenges in people who are disengaging can encourage help-seeking behavior and a willingness to engage with others. Reconciliation and restorative justice principles can provide a sense of justice and reduce stigma against those disengaging, enabling routine and sincere prosocial engagement and offering a tangible alternative identity. People often disengage from violent extremism in the same environments in which they first engaged. Structural reforms to address legitimate grievances link prevention with disengagement, helping transform the dynamics that contribute to violent extremism and build more resilient communities.

Liaqat Ali Shah, an alleged former militant who returned from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, talks with relatives from his window in a Lolab Valley village in India-controlled Kashmir on June 27, 2013. (Photo by Kuni Takahashi/New York Times)

Introduction

> Disengagement involves the rehumanization of the other; the gulf between social identities needs to be closed for people to sustainably disengage from violent extremism, and closing the gulf takes movement on both sides of it.

If what you see in a mirror doesn't correspond with how others see you, you're not alone. Such dissonance is a common cognitive bias.[1] The same is true for perceptions of social groups—each group forms a shared narrative to bind their imagined community. These narratives include histories, symbols, norms, and values as well as stereotypes. It is through these lenses that people perceive others—their behavior and their intentions—and form a gulf amplifying differences between *them* and *us* regardless of the reality. That gulf can be frightening—violent extremism, although complex and multifaceted, is a result of perceived social identity threat whereby violence is deployed defensively in the name of one social group against another. Disengagement involves the rehumanization of the other; the gulf between social identities needs to be closed for people to sustainably disengage from violent extremism, and closing the gulf takes movement on both sides of it.

Peacebuilding provides a toolbox for doing just that. Peacebuilding approaches embrace complexity, humanity, and context.[2] They "seek to change . . . attitudes and behaviors and to transform dynamics between individuals and groups toward a more stable, peaceful coexistence."[3] Peacebuilding "works over the long run and at all levels of society to establish and sustain relationships among people. . . . [It] connects people and groups [and] aims not only to resolve conflicts, but to build societies,

Box 1.
A WORD ON THE WORDS WE USE

Behavioral health. Integrates mental health with social well-being, community resilience, and physical health to effect behavioral change of high-risk conduct such as aggression and violence; used to underscore the idea that though cognitive elements are involved, engagement in violent extremism is a behavioral challenge—not a psychological disorder.

Community. "A psychological process by which one perceives a sense of membership and belonging in a group."[a]

Disengagement. Rejection of violence to resolve conflict, express grievances, or pursue a goal.

Mobilization. A dynamic and often nonlinear process by which an individual, group, or mass of people undergo a transformation that results in engagement in violent extremism.

People-first language. Places the person before the label—such as people disengaging from violent extremism—to avoid stigmatizing and reinforcing identities steeped in past acts of violence while acknowledging the action to facilitate reconciliation.

Prosocial. Sustained, positive, inclusive interactions between individuals who are disengaging from violent extremism and local community members and institutions.

Reconciliation. A process by which communities and people disengaging from violent extremism rehumanize each other and foster healing to reduce stigma, open spaces for prosocial engagement, address needs for justice and accountability, restore relationships, and move from exclusion and fear to inclusion and productive participation in the community and society.

Violent extremism. A form of violent conflict in which people "espouse, encourage, and perpetrate violence as they seek to [replace] existing political [or social] institutions with a new political [or social] order governed by [an absolutist and totalitarian] doctrine that denies individual liberty and equal rights to citizens who identify differently."[b]

Notes

a. B. Heidi Ellis and Saida Abdi, "Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism Through Genuine Partnerships," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 291.

b. Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, *Preventing Extremism in Fragile States* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2019), 19.

The imperative to "do something" to disengage people from violent extremism remains high; but that something needs to be grounded in robust evidence to address the dynamics as they exist.

institutions, policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice."[4] Peacebuilding tools can rehumanize not only society in the eyes of those disengaging, but also those disengaging in the eyes of society. Such reconciliation can transcend the tyranny of past actions and build relationships and bonds to chart new and sustainable futures, more inclusive societies, and more resilient communities. This report presents a foundation for the peacebuilding contribution to disengagement from violent extremism that focuses on individuals as well as social and structural dynamics.

Existing efforts to disengage people from violent extremism are derived not from a peacebuilding ethos but instead from security imperatives. They target individuals and ideology but in several ways run counter to the available research on how people exit roles.[5] First, the assumption that radical beliefs precede violence lacks a good evidence base—factors such as state predation and systemic discrimination are just as likely as radical ideology.[6] Second, most people who leave violent extremist groups generally do not do so because of a sudden change of heart but instead for more mundane reasons.[7] Finally, decades of psychology, sociology, criminology, and public health practice on violence prevention, behavioral health, and voluntary role exit

underscore prosocial interactions as key to transforming relationships, building social bonds, and generating a sense of belonging.[8]

Accordingly, the peacebuilding approach identifies and lowers barriers to such sustained, positive, inclusive engagement. These include cognitive and individual barriers (by healing trauma and addressing mental health challenges to encourage help-seeking and prosocial behavior), social and communal barriers (by providing a sense of justice and accountability to reduce stigma), and structural barriers (by linking prevention with disengagement when people reintegrate into the same environments where they were initially mobilized).

Facilitating prosocial interactions between those disengaging and community members and institutions requires open spaces in society conducive to such engagement. Reciprocal rehumanization shifts focus away from the burden of forgiveness and toward building relationships and reconstituting identities together by addressing each level of social ecology—individual, social, and structural. When people interact, the other becomes far less scary—this is the peacebuilding contribution to disengagement from violent extremism.

Ideology, Social Ties, and Behavior

Conventional approaches to why and how people engage in violent extremism focus primarily on ideological radicalization into an extremist belief system. It follows from these conceptions that counternarratives and ideological reeducation programs to correct the misconceptions that foster these beliefs can "deradicalize" people away from violent extremism. However, ideology is only one component of a more complex system, and these conceptions fail to address the nature of both engagement and disengagement as at once behavioral and social.

RADICALIZATION

Radicalization is a problematic concept as applied to violent extremism. It is inherently subjective—it "indicates movement on [a] continuum [of thought]," and determining the line between acceptable and unacceptable thought is fraught with human rights challenges.[9] In the absence of a tangible boundary of observable behavior to demarcate when radicalization or deradicalization has occurred, legally mandated programs risk abridging freedom of expression and of religion by criminalizing an arbitrarily selected set of beliefs. Repressive governments that seek to control dissent or use disproportionate force to target and oppress entire social groups suddenly have a counterterrorism rationalization to legitimize their actions.

In China, for example, terrorism is defined as "any advocacy or activity that, by means of violence, sabotage, or threat aims to create social panic, undermine public safety, infringe on personal and property rights, or coerce a state organ or an international organization, in order to achieve political, ideological, or other objectives."[10] In Saudi Arabia, criticisms of the king and crown prince are considered terrorist offenses.[11] In Indonesia, terrorism is defined to include "the threat of violence . . . [including any] speech, writing, picture, symbol or physical . . . which may incite fear in a person."[12] Such definitions put people at risk by effectively sanctioning arbitrary extradition, expulsion, or deportation; unjustified deprivation of liberty and detention; discrimination and ethnic or racial profiling of and in communities; denial of due process; loss of freedoms of expression and association; and disproportionate infringements on privacy.[13] In China, up to a million Muslim Uighurs have been held in detention camps for "re-education" and subjected to forced labor based on an artificial intelligence–powered platform using algorithms for "predictive policing" that include indicators such as unusually high electricity use, spending too much time alone, and buying gasoline for an automobile registered to someone else.[14] In Turkey and Egypt, journalists have been prosecuted on terrorist charges for exercising the freedom of expression; in Egypt, citizens can be denied due process for alleged links to terrorist organizations.[15] Such definitions—which are derived from a flawed assumption that beliefs and behavior are causally linked, that radical ideas lead to violent behavior, and that if the radical ideas are abandoned violence will be renounced—ease authoritarian efforts to consolidate power and sanction repressive government behavior.

Behavioral science, however, has known for decades that beliefs and violent behavior are not causally linked. Since the 1970s, sociologists have demonstrated that "a strong bond between an individual and a social environment [is] strongly influenced by . . . level of 'attachment' . . . , 'commitment' . . . , 'involvement' . . . , and 'beliefs'";

and that beliefs is only one reason people engage with a given group—and rarely the most salient.[16] Indeed, although some people who develop ideologies considered extreme resort to violence, most do not.

> The manpower estimates for the Taliban and other insurgent organizations in Afghanistan represented a minute fraction of the 29 percent of the population said to be sympathetic toward such groups in 2011. Similarly, those who support "suicide attacks" in the Palestinian Territories, reportedly reaching 66 percent of the population in 2005, far outnumber those actually involved in producing this violence.[17]

Likewise, this radicalization paradigm fails to make room for other—nonviolent and even positive—outcomes.[18] Engagement both in nonviolent activism and in violent extremism stem from similar grievances—marginalization, state predation, corruption—and address many of the same kinds of needs—a sense of belonging, an expression of agency, and a feeling of significance.[19] Indeed, beliefs perceived as radical can inspire social progress and selfless humanitarianism when people

> stay within social norms but take [their beliefs] to an extreme level of self-sacrifice. This may involve risking one's life to benefit others in an objectively and consistently pro-social manner. . . . The paradox is, both cohorts stem from the same domestic sentiment pool and use the same sacred values to undergird their morally opposed behaviors.[20]

In fact,

> preceding its current use in the context of terrorism . . . [the term radicalization] was mostly used to describe political mobilization in the black community, in women's movements, and in social engagement to fight exclusion in Latin America. . . . Although these forms of social solidarities could sometimes be associated with violence, this highlights that radicalization of opinion not only does not linearly lead to violent extremism but also that violence may not be the most common outcome.[21]
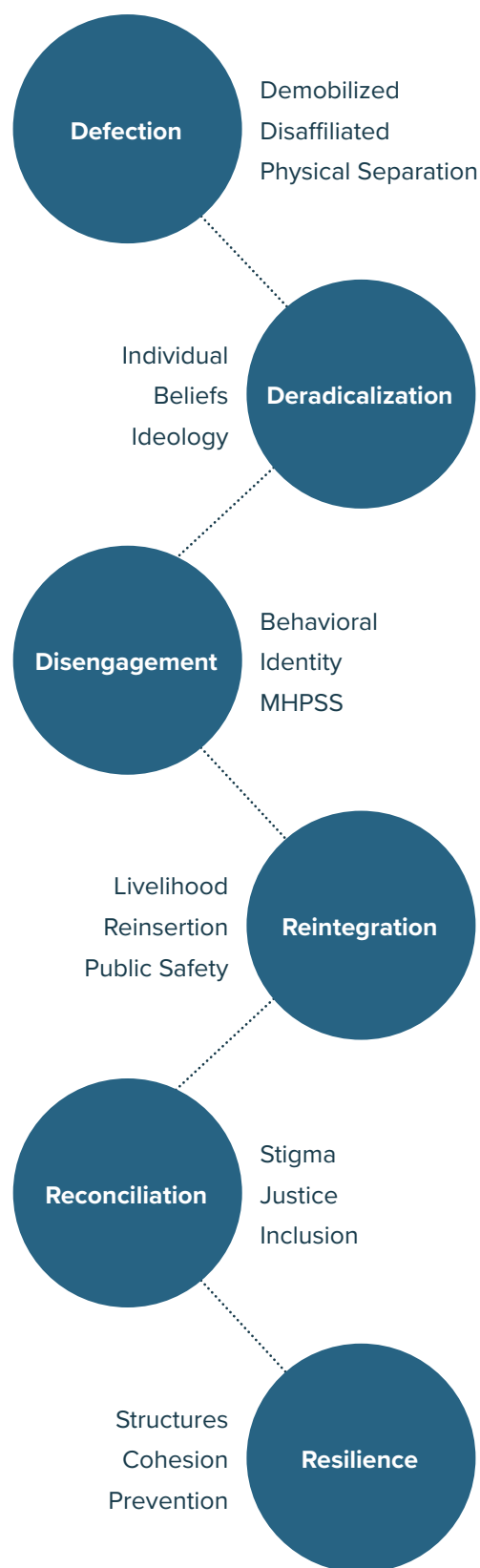
Ideology, then, is not the problem. The problem is violent behavior.

The pathways people take into violence are complex, idiosyncratic, and nonlinear; people travel in and out of engagement in violent extremism frequently.[22] Likewise, no parsimonious ideological or psychological profile applies to those who engage in violent extremism. Some radicals are not terrorists. Some terrorists are not radicals. Some former terrorists continue to adhere to a radical ideology.[23] Indeed, legitimate grievances such as state predation; discrimination; exclusion from political structures, systems, and processes; historical or collective trauma; intergroup conflict; and oppression are at least as likely to contribute to a person's engagement in violent extremism as ideology.

It would be more accurate to describe highly individualized interactions among a host of contributing dynamics than discreet and separate drivers of violent extremism. "Fantasies of glory, coupled with moral outrage and grievance, and the adoption of snippets of a belief system that sanctions violence, become the internal template for the beginning of a pathway to violence."[24] In many cases, ideology is only a vehicle by which a host of idiosyncrasies, circumstances, and interactions are repackaged. In the absence of such an ideological channel, those dynamics may often be expressed through other forms of violence instead.

Radicalization provides a deceptively simplistic pinpoint that public discourse can appropriate as a bogeyman. In such a line of reasoning, if policies and practices were implemented to detect people vulnerable to radicalization, remove radical content, or counter radical messages, future terrorist threats could be mitigated. Unfortunately, such focus obfuscates what may be legitimate grievances by shifting the narrative away from structural and political challenges that may need to be addressed and toward predatory recruiters, vulnerable groups, and individuals with psychological deficiencies.[25] This has been the focus of mainstream approaches to counter violent extremism since 2001, which have failed to adequately understand what mobilizes people to engage in violent extremism or what is likely to bring about disengagement from it.

Figure 1. All of the Ds and All of the Rs

Defection
Demobilized
Disaffiliated
Physical Separation

Individual
Beliefs
Ideology
Deradicalization

Disengagement
Behavioral
Identity
MHPSS

Livelihood
Reinsertion
Public Safety
Reintegration

Reconciliation
Stigma
Justice
Inclusion

Structures
Cohesion
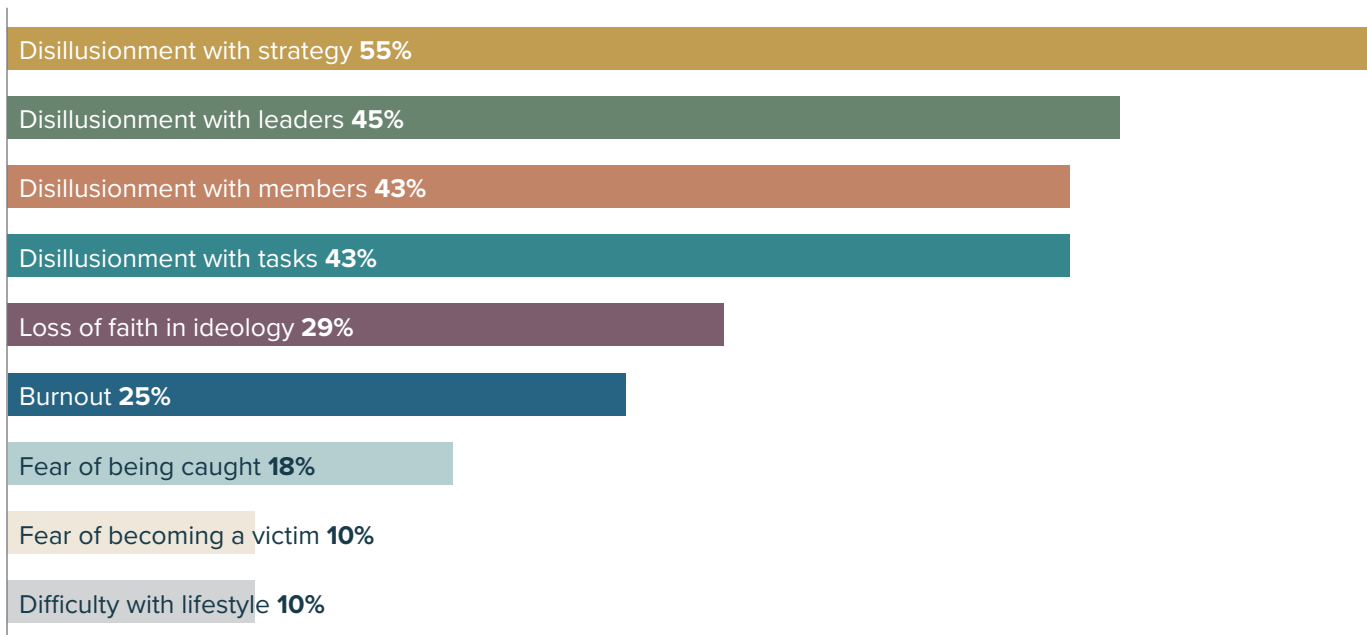Prevention
Resilience

DERADICALIZATION

Terrorism remains a global challenge. Far-right terrorist incidents have increased by 320 percent since 2015. Likewise, although the territorial decline of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) paralleled a decrease in terrorism-related deaths from a peak in 2014, terrorism continues to spread globally. The second-highest number of countries affected by terrorism since 2002 was in 2018.[26] Further, the postconflict realities in Iraq and Syria include more than ten thousand people from dozens of countries who fought with ISIS and are being held in Syria, as well as more than seventy thousand who lived with ISIS and are consigned to displacement camps in Syria such as al-Hol and Roj. Of these seventy thousand, more than two-thirds are children and more than ten thousand are from one of up to a hundred countries other than Iraq or Syria.[27] The imperative to "do something" to disengage people from violent extremism remains high; but that something needs to be grounded in robust evidence to address the dynamics as they exist.

Like radicalization, deradicalization derives from the seductive nature of ideology, centering belief and thought—rather than behavior and actions—as the fulcrum of change. Most who disengage from violent extremism, however, do so for a cocktail of reasons—and ideological change is rarely cited as among the chief motivations. Across several studies, findings are remarkably consistent at identifying reasons why people disengage from violent extremism. Interviews with twenty-two disengaged violent extremists reveal that disillusionment with leadership was the primary reason for disengagement in the majority of cases; disillusionment with other group members, burnout, and excessive violence were also cited more often than disillusionment with radical ideas.[28] Another study catalogues the reasons for disengagement among the autobiographies of eighty-seven disengaged violent extremists. The findings are strikingly similar: disillusionment with strategy was most often cited as a significant factor in disengagement, followed by disillusionment with leaders, disillusionment with other

Figure 2. Factors in Disengagement

Factor	Percentage
Disillusionment with strategy	**55%**
Disillusionment with leaders	**45%**
Disillusionment with members	**43%**
Disillusionment with tasks	**43%**
Loss of faith in ideology	**29%**
Burnout	**25%**
Fear of being caught	**18%**
Fear of becoming a victim	**10%**
Difficulty with lifestyle	**10%**

Source: Based on Mary Beth Altier et al., "Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-Seven Autobiographical Accounts," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 319–21.

group members, disillusionment with day-to-day tasks, and burnout. In only 16 percent of the cases was loss of faith in the ideology a significant factor—and in only 29 percent was it a factor at all.[29]

Not only is evidence scant that ideological change results in behavioral change, forcibly changing someone's worldview is exceptionally difficult under any circumstance. In situations in which people are reminded of their mortality—such as violent extremist contexts—approaches couched in the legitimacy of ideology, beliefs, and values actually risk buttressing a person's commitment; individuals tend to fortify their beliefs and react even more negatively toward outgroup members who have other values.[30] In this way, deradicalization efforts are the coefficient of radicalization—multiplying the virulence of violent extremism rather than mitigating it.

Neuroimaging studies suggest that although sacred values and worldviews are resistant to social influence, the behaviors to defend those values can change based on perceptions of what a group considers acceptable and unacceptable. Thus, changing someone's belief system entirely may be an ineffective strategy, but changing violent behavior may be a more practical solution.[31]

Disengagement and Reconciliation

Fostering relationships, building social bonds, and expanding a social group to include people who renounce extremist violence as an acceptable way to pursue a goal or resolve a conflict may be effective at influencing behavior and facilitating disengagement from violence.[32]

MOBILIZING TO ENGAGE

Whereas radicalization is an ambiguous process by which a person comes to adopt beliefs considered diametrically opposed to a society's core values, mobilization is an observable, behavioral process of engaging in violent extremism. The process of mobilization to engage in violent extremism is inherently social, the product of lived experience in a given social ecology. "Psychologically engaging with groups . . . is a part of every journey to violent extremism." Group dynamics such as collective grievances and shared narratives are an essential component of mobilization because they emphasize an exclusionary identity. Social identification with a group thus widens the aperture of relevant context. Not only can perceptions of personal experiences contribute to the mobilization process, those of group status and treatment also can, regardless of whether the perceptions are supported by direct experience. The mobilizing "effect of 'them' and 'us' thinking is not predicated on individual-level vulnerabilities such as a lack of personal resilience to extremist narratives. Rather, it is predicated on group-making practices that define people as 'other' and so define relations in 'them and us' (intergroup) terms." Violent extremism is a phenomenon that occurs either in solidarity with or in the name of a particular social group—it is a form of collective action.[33]

A neurological study conducted on a selection of people in Barcelona who were engaged in or supported jihadist violence finds that alienation and social exclusion increased the salience of sacred values, which are inviolable deontological principles not subject to compromise.[34] As group values harden, they become intermingled with constructs of individual identity. "People's collective identities become fused with their personal self-concept, [and] they subsequently display increased willingness to engage in extreme progroup behavior when the group is threatened."[35] Indeed, human neurobiology has evolved over eons in such a way that group belonging is vital for survival; thus, threats to a social group are perceived as existential. Accordingly, neuroscience studies find that threats to group identity and status activate the same neurobiological reactions as threats to physical safety, which dehumanize those perceived as threatening and remove cognitive inhibitions to violence.[36]

Mobilization to violence thus occurs as a result of complex interactions among cognitive, social, and structural dynamics—a "kaleidoscope of factors."[37] Individual perceptions of marginalization and isolation can harden sacred values and fuse individual and group identities. Such fusion increases affinity for the ingroup and consolidates social interaction among like-minded group members. The resulting network becomes a vector for the *consensualization* of stereotypes and perceived grievances and injustices, creating a common narrative that validates an imperative for collective action.[38] Because this shared reality is internalized as an assault on identity, society is dehumanized as a threat, and

Figure 3. Mobilization Kaleidoscope
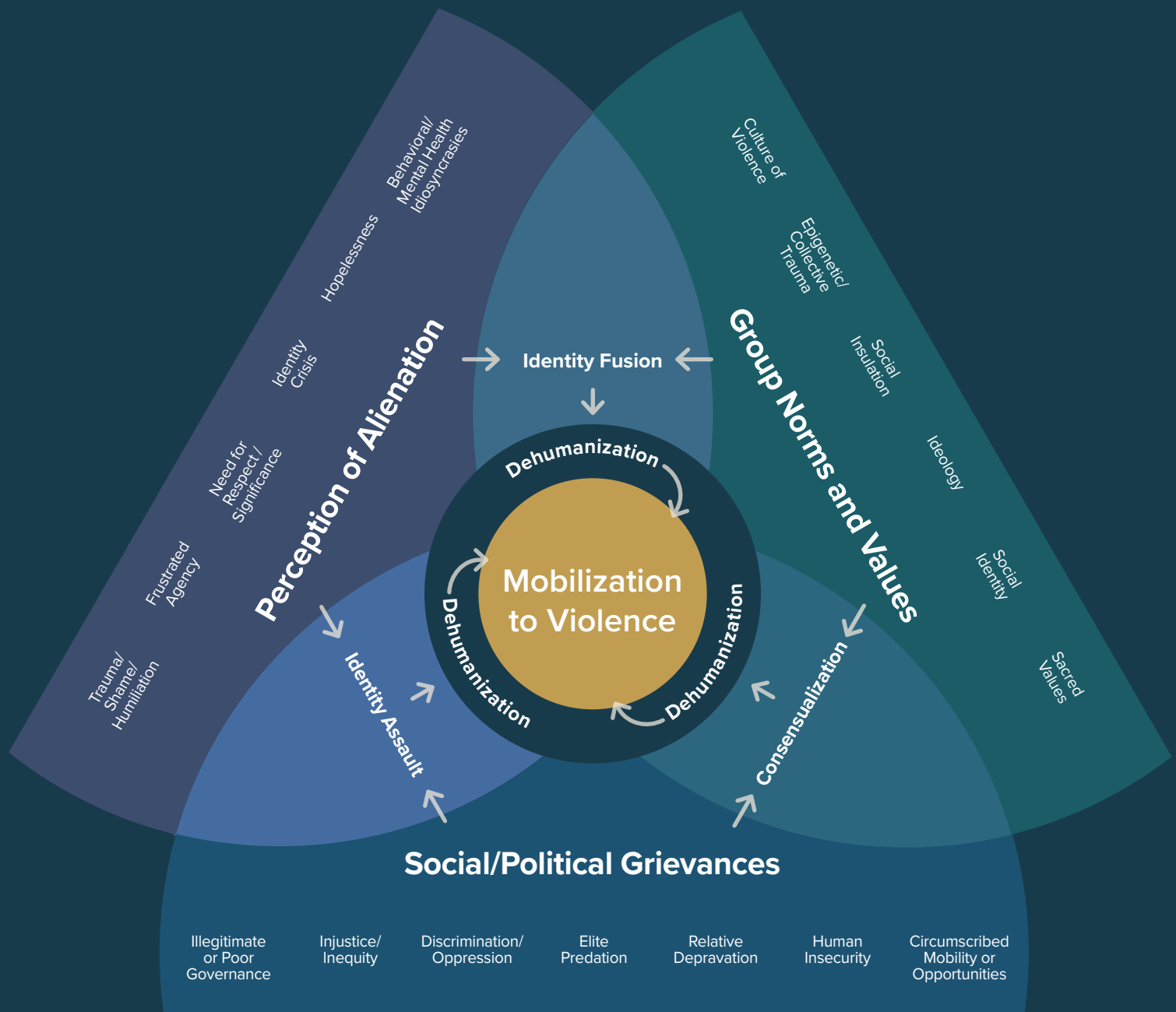
Note: In the context of violent extremism, the dynamics that contribute to mobilization may appear, in Magnus Ranstorp's phrase, an overwhelming "kaleidoscope of factors." Each element, though, interacts serendipitously when the cognitive, social, and structural dynamics interact in such a way to mobilize violence. Indeed, cognitive factors and dynamics—including trauma, victimization, hopelessness, frustrated agency, human needs for respect and significance, and certain behavioral and mental health characteristics—can result in perceptions of alienation and marginalization. Such perceptions often result in identity crises whereby sense of self becomes fused with social identity. In settings that enable violent extremism, group norms and values can interact with systems-level norms and grievances in such a way that personal values strain against those of society, and social group and identity appear under assault. In such circumstances, social selection can result in increased interactions with like-minded individuals and exposure to narratives that consensualize the dehumanization of others and provide a moral justification for the use of violence for people who are idiosyncratically susceptible to violent behavior and social influence.[a]

a. Noémie Bouhana, "The Moral Ecology of Extremism, A Systemic Perspective," UK Commission for Counter Extremism, July 2019, 14–15.

Individual-level risk and resiliency factors certainly have their place in disengagement programs, and a person's agency in their decision to engage in violent extremism should not be minimized, but dynamic group processes and relationships need to be addressed as well.

violence emerges as a viable way to address those grievances and defend the ingroup.

EXCEPTIONALIZATION

The dynamics involved in mobilization are complex and challenging. Many other social issues that arise from similar underlying conditions and dynamics also are—fragility, violent conflict, poverty, and poor population health—yet violent extremism has been exceptionalized. In the years immediately following 2001, the global center of gravity for countering terrorism was segregated from other areas of practice that address social challenges. It was racialized as largely Islamic, securitized as a global war on terror, and driven primarily by intelligence, military, and law enforcement expertise.[39] As a result, networks and collaboration between counterterrorism and other fields were slow to form, insulating counterterrorism practice from relevant good practices. For example, despite a slew of well-established programs, especially in Europe, that drew from a body of psychology, criminology, and sociology research to disengage people from gangs and far-right violent extremist groups, disengagement from Islamic terrorism consisted too often of military operations to neutralize terrorist organizations and targeted strikes to kill high-value targets. By 2005, a handful of countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Southeast Asia began to develop the first generation of so-called deradicalization programs for violent Islamic extremists. These programs were generally centralized and run by the state, prison-based and mandatory, and oriented to religious reeducation. They were also often designed to funnel information to intelligence and law enforcement services, which at times undermined their legitimacy. In addition, their focus on theological counternarratives to convince people engaged in violent extremism that their interpretation of dogma and religious texts was incorrect assumed a causal link between ideology and violence.[40]

Even when programs in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Indonesia, Egypt, Malaysia, Singapore, and Morocco began to expand beyond ideological deradicalization by including psychologists and social workers as core staff, they typically remained focused on individual-level dynamics.[41] These programs were for the most part structured on learning and psychosocial activities that in turn focused on critical thinking skills and assessing risk of recidivism without systematically engaging the social and structural factors that keep people engaged in violent extremism.[42] Programs that focus on skills deficits by providing micro-grants, vocational training, and education were a step forward but failed to directly address cognitive dimensions or the influence of social networks. Individual-level risk and resiliency factors certainly have their place in disengagement programs, and a person's agency in their decision to engage in violent extremism should not be minimized, but dynamic group processes and relationships need to be addressed as well.[43]

Approaches such as behavioral health and harm reduction have addressed this entire social ecology in an integrated way. Indeed, behavioral change is an integral feature of public health practice, and harm reduction approaches minimize risk and build community capacity by shifting "the *focus of change* from individuals alone to the social situations and structures in which they find themselves. . . . They draw attention to [behavioral challenges] as the manifestation of *system* rather than aggregated individual-level effects."[44] Harm reduction was borne out of European drug policies that recognized abstinence as an ideal but unrealistic outcome and instead focused on building community resilience to drug use and mitigating the adverse effects of drug use on individuals and communities. The approach has since been expanded from addiction to include other behavioral challenges to public health and social well-being such as gambling, sun safety, sex work,

injury prevention, gun violence, and youth violence.[45] Its practices are designed to minimize the negative effects of high-risk behaviors by addressing complex challenges with low-threshold access to services and bottom-up alternatives to moral, criminal, or disease models.[46] Harm reduction approaches offer pragmatic and compassionate strategies that begin by validating the lived experience of individuals and meeting people where they are.

By focusing on system, these practices avoid the temptation of parsimony and eschew the need to argue worldview. In violence prevention, harm reduction approaches embrace decades of sociology, psychology, and criminology research on how people voluntarily exit roles, including violent and ideological ones, which confirms that social and structural dynamics are just as important as individual ones.[47] This robust and longitudinal body of research frames commitment to a role as a function not only of satisfaction, or degree of ideological belief, but also of available alternatives and sunk costs already invested in the role.[48] Yet because violent extremism has been securitized and exceptionalized, approaches to prevent and counter violent extremism to date generally have failed to apply this principle.

For example, criminology research has reached consensus that prosocial bonds to facilitate the adoption of nonviolent social norms have a significant role in criminal and gang desistance.[49] Accordingly, the research also stresses that "the absence of a 'receiving group' [is] a significant barrier to establishing a new identity, achieving a sense of belonging outside the group, and obtaining protection from potential reprisals."[50] In many ways, the mechanisms gangs use to trap members in the group are similar to those of violent extremist organizations. Because both gangs and terrorist groups are perceived as "irrationally violent"—their members are ostracized and excluded from local communities and society, and regarded with fear and often anger.[51] The resulting isolation not only increases ingroup cohesion, but also reinforces the consensualized narrative of injustices and the feelings of alienation that harden sacred values and foster identity fusion.

Similar mechanisms are involved in disaffiliation from ideological movements such as cults. Like members of violent extremist organizations, cult members often experience a form of identity fusion: because they interact almost exclusively with the group, the social influence of other social circles is reduced. The social dependency on the cult reinforces collective narratives and norms. Absent competing influences, consensualization of values, behaviors, norms, and narratives occurs, and the identity of the individual merges with that of the cult. Whereas stigma and fear present a significant tangible barrier to gang desistance, the salience of a shared reality is a significant barrier to cult disaffiliation. Often "the disaffiliation process is initiated by the 'discovery' or 'induction' of some kind of [cognitive] 'dissonance', which is powerful enough to result in one's adoption of an alternative reference group . . . to resolve the dissonance."[52] Not surprisingly, then, just as prosocial bonds with people outside a gang are associated with gang desistance, so are prosocial interactions with people outside the cult associated with cult disaffiliation—the very act of engaging with others can create a cognitive dissonance by challenging the stereotypes that cult narratives propagate.[53]

Indeed, prosocial engagement with other groups is a key feature of voluntary exit. Exiting violent roles and exiting ideological ones, although certainly not mutually exclusive, presents unique barriers and challenges. Desistance from violent roles such as gangs and criminality is met with community-level and stigma-related barriers. Communities that are afraid and angry present a closed front for those who might otherwise be motivated to leave a gang by blocking opportunities, leaving the individual with no choice but to remain engaged or recidivate. Providing those communities with a sense of justice can begin to reconcile the anger just as sincere prosocial engagement with those disengaging can build relationships and reduce fear. Disaffiliation from ideological roles such as cults often is met with perceptions among cult members that the cult is the only identity available. Similarly, prosocial

Gulpari Farziyeva (left) holds her daughter at a rehabilitation center for women repatriated from the Islamic State, in Aktau, Kazakhstan, on July 22, 2019. (Photo by Tara Todras-Whitehill/New York Times)

engagement with community members can challenge that perception and offer a viable alternative.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES, SOCIAL SOLUTIONS

Social and political systems and structures that encourage regularized and systematized interaction by individuals among several identity groups via inclusive representation and equitable distribution of goods and services can moderate intergroup conflict and promote cooperation.[54] Moreover, such routinized prosocial interactions can transform identities, expanding the boundaries of group and inviting others into the franchise.[55] On an individual level, prosocial interactions and the affective bonds formed between people as a result can bridge otherwise intractable differences. Studies show that even in contexts of protracted conflict, expressions of compassion from a single member of an outgroup can trigger reciprocal empathy toward that entire group,

despite the well-documented ingroup bias for empathy.[56] Empathy is key to sustaining prosocial behavior, building social bonds, rejecting intergroup or interpersonal violence, and transforming social identities.[57] This phenomenon is reflected by a striking number of people who highlight unexpected compassion from an outgroup member as a key moment that created a cognitive dissonance, opened their minds to other options, and catalyzed their disengagement processes.[58]

Sarah (a pseudonym) became involved in the skinhead neo-Nazi movement in her high school, for example. As is common among people who engage in violent extremism, she credits her mobilization to a host of dynamics and traumas in her childhood and adolescence that manifested in anger and feelings of alienation. The anger and violence of local neo-Nazi groups resonated with her by offering an alternative, countercultural lifestyle. During

her period of engagement, Sarah began brandishing tattoos and other symbols, not only to demonstrate her commitment to other group members and to society but also to reinforce the identity by reminding herself of the acceptance she found in the group.

From early on in her engagement, Sarah had doubts about the ideology of the movement. She felt hypocritical for dating people of color and feeling attracted to other women. She struggled to reconcile the movement when the Oklahoma City bombing killed nineteen children, which caused an introspection that resulted in deep disillusionment. But without any tangible alternatives available to her, Sarah remained engaged and even became more tenacious in her recruitment activity and violent behavior to hide her disillusionment and demonstrate commitment to other group members.

Like many people engaged in violent extremism, Sarah vacillated between periods of committing to exit and getting pulled back in by the self-worth, validation, protection, empowerment, and social bonds the movement provided. This continued until she was forced to disaffiliate when she was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to federal prison for aiding in an armed robbery. But it wasn't just the physical separation prison placed between her and the movement that resulted in her eventual disengagement—it was even more so interactions she had with people of color inside prison, the empathy demonstrated by them, and the new social bonds and relationships she built with them. These new bonds and experiences opened Sarah's mind, and the opportunity provided to receive higher education while in prison made her realize that she could find self-worth outside of the movement through her "responsibility to go out and try to undo damage, try to put a stop to it [violence, racism] and . . . its infantile stages if [I] can help someone."[59]

Mobilization to violence is not simply a ball of yarn that can be unwound: disengagement is similarly not necessarily linear; it is often organic, presenting and

revoking opportunities for cognitive openings in turn. Disengagement programs must reflect this complexity by both being responsive to the needs of each individual and addressing the cognitive, social, and structural dynamics that facilitated a person's mobilization to violent extremism, as well as the changes a person experienced during their engagement. Indeed, disengagement from violent extremism is a two-way street. If mobilization is the result of complex group dynamics that involve perceptions of social exclusion and consensualizing outgroup stereotypes, then the existence of an available, viable, and tangible alternative identity into which disengaging persons are welcome is not optional. Presenting such an opportunity is not straightforward—not only must the shames, fears, and behavioral health challenges of those who are disengaging be addressed to encourage help-seeking behavior and a willingness to interact prosocially among a broader community, but the broader community must also reduce its stigmas, fear, anger, and prejudice so that community members are willing to interact with those who are disengaging. Enabling such interaction is not enough, however. Unless those interactions are routinized, social learning will not occur, relationships and bonds will not be built, and a sense of belonging will not be generated.

Removing barriers to open spaces for prosocial interactions requires addressing the legitimate grievances or reforming political systems and social structures that contribute to divisions and violent extremism within a given social ecology. In this way, disengagement from violent extremism and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) are integrally linked, and efforts to build more inclusive communities and improve social cohesion are vital not only for preventing violent extremism but also for sustainable disengagement from it. For example, political institutions that fail to inclusively aggregate, articulate, and channel—or actively repress—the preferences and interests of certain segments of the population exclude those social groups from a stake in the social compact and forestall meaningful engagement between members of those groups and other

People disengaging from violent extremism while . . . engaging with the same political and social systems . . . will experience a very similar lived experience and shared reality as those that contributed to their initial engagement. Without efforts to address those dynamics, disengagement is not sustainable.

community members.[60] Likewise, patrimonial political networks that mobilize political participation along rigid identity cleavages or corrupt elites who hoard scarce resources for a favored social group contribute to fractures within communities that prevent the cross-cutting of identities and cross-group interactions that break down barriers to routine prosocial engagement.

Moreover, PVE efforts that target vulnerable communities or geographic hotspots are unlikely to encounter communities in which people are not already engaged in violent extremism. The success of such programs depends on also targeting networks that catalyze the mobilization of others. Likewise, people disengaging from violent extremism while interacting with the same social networks; engaging with the same political and social systems, structures, and norms; and accessing the same sources of information will experience a very similar lived experience and shared reality as those that contributed to their initial engagement. Without efforts to address those dynamics, disengagement is not sustainable.[61]

Tailored Interventions

Programs designed to facilitate personal and social development often engage directly with communities to reduce stigma and promote interactions between program beneficiaries and the community.

In Indonesia, the Stabilisation Network's Hearts, Hands and Heads approach to social disengagement, developed with local partner Kreasi Prasasti Perdamaian, wins trust with people at risk of mobilization to violent extremism by highlighting commonalities, identifying alternate versions of self-worth, and establishing social networks; encouraging education, entrepreneurship, and creativity;

and fostering acceptance by local communities. The program trains mentors—many of whom have themselves disengaged from violent extremism—to engage with communities to identify potential beneficiaries; involving community leaders helps educate and reduce stigma and gives them a stake in it. One mentee, recently released from prison on terror-related charges, feared for his safety, the possibility of recidivism, and rejection by his community. The successive meetings demonstrated to the community the individual's desire to return home, eventually leading him to be welcomed back and to become more active in educating local people about the dangers of radicalism and terrorism.

In Melbourne, Australia, STREAT focuses on trauma-informed, strength-based prosocial integration to foster belonging and sense of self and purpose for youth who are at risk of not only violent extremism but also other adverse outcomes such as crime, homelessness, social isolation, early school leaving, and chronic unemployment. The program provides training and employment pathways in several businesses, providing a sense of connection, safety, and belonging. By providing vocational training and employment, tailored personal support, and work-life skills, the program provides a renewed sense of empowerment and self-respect. The experience of being part of a real work team combined with the public setting of a café encourages prosocial interactions with a wide range of other community members. Paid jobs with carefully chosen employment partners are available to all graduates, and intensive postplacement support follows for another six months. STREAT's operating principle is that if a person keeps their first job for twelve months, lifetime employment increases by 85 percent. As one trainee remarked, "It's easy to feel you belong if someone cares. Not many people care in my world."

Individual-Level Barriers

No psychopathology of a terrorist has been established, and violent extremism is not caused by a diagnosable psychological or mental health disorder. Indeed "any effort to uncover 'the terrorist mind' will more likely result in uncovering a spectrum of terrorist minds."[62] This does not mean, however, that mental health and cognition have no role in mobilization. Similarly, although existing disengagement programs overemphasize individual-level dynamics, those dynamics should not be overlooked. Even when social ecologies and political systems conspire in such a way that people feel excluded, and collective grievances draw marginalized people together in a shared reality that may be sympathetic toward violence, only a handful of people will actually engage in violent extremism. Such variance can often be explained by how individual-level dynamics interact with the context in which people find themselves.[63] Indeed, biological and psychological influences on cognition help explain why some people in a given environment engage in violence and others refrain from it.[64]

On neurobiological, neuroprocessing, and genetic levels, several mechanisms may correlate with a predilection toward violence. Many are genetic and epigenetic, but the interactions and their behavioral and mental health effects differ for each individual. For example, the interaction of certain chemical levels in the brain, which can be affected by trauma and stress, and gene expressions can influence cognitive function.[65] Adverse experiences thus sometimes cause structural changes to brain processing that can alter memory formation and retrieval, threat detection and vigilance, and emotion regulation processes, which may make some people more aggressive or more inclined to violence.[66] A clinical discussion of the interactions among neurological processes and the specific neurobiological mechanisms involved and treatment methods are beyond the scope of this report, but neurological functions are important to consider when exploring the individual-level dynamics in violent extremism. Disengagement programs must examine how local contexts may interact with these processes to ensure that they are effectively calibrated to mitigate them, to encourage help-seeking behavior, and to forestall social avoidance and antisocial responses.

TRAUMA AND SHAME

Neurobiological processes and functioning, however, do not determine violent behavior in a vacuum. Only in conjunction with other psychological and social dynamics can they influence a person to engage, or remain engaged, in violent activity. Traumatic stress is, in fact, associated with a host of mental health challenges and antisocial behaviors, including anxiety, depression, substance-related disorders, poor self-regulation and information-processing capacities, criminality, and aggression.[67] Also, trauma is often associated with adversity during resettlement into local communities. Discrimination and stigma, socioeconomic uncertainty, and status loss are stressors often associated with reintegration that can aggravate trauma and undermine disengagement.[68]

Trauma-informed care needs to become a hallmark of disengagement programs. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention explains, six principles guide such an approach to treatment: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender respect.[69] Trauma-informed care is not a technique or method but instead an awareness and sensitivity that behavioral health providers must maintain throughout any treatment plan to avoid subjecting a person to more trauma. It conceives of trauma through a social-ecology framework that identifies risk

and protective factors across the multiple levels that trauma may exert bidirectional influence on—including individuals, interpersonal relationships, and communities.[70] It draws attention to how trauma might affect a person's behavior and life by emphasizing "adaptation over symptoms and resilience over pathology."[71] Trauma-informed care that incorporates social-ecological interventions cannot be confined to clinical settings and applied solely by mental health professionals but instead needs to be integrated across the entire community, including law enforcement and policing authorities, social workers, educators, and other social service practitioners who should build trust and contribute to the overall health and resilience of individuals and communities.

Women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities often face gender-specific challenges during reintegration after exiting violent extremist conflicts. Although women play diverse roles in violent extremist groups and are often just as committed and violent as men, they and girls are often enslaved, raped, and subjected to physical and emotional abuse; sexual and gender minorities may be threatened with death.[72] Studies have indicated a strong correlation between women who experience violence and the development of mental health challenges such as substance abuse, "feelings of powerlessness and low self esteem . . . , [low] ability to advocate for themselves . . . , problems with self-soothing and emotional modulation, anger, shame, flashbacks, depression, suicide attempts, self-inflicted violence, terror, disassociation, and disconnection from others."[73] Amplifying these dynamics, women who participated in violent extremism often are ostracized from local communities because of perceptions that they have transgressed gender norms, whether as victims of sexual violence or by participating in violent conflict. The same women often have been widowed, or have escaped from, been abandoned by, or separated from husbands and fathers, and may become the sole income provider after reintegration.[74] Unable to earn a living, disillusioned by the stigma against them, and frustrated by their inability to conceive of a future, women and girls returning from conflict in Sierra Leone and the Democratic

Republic of Congo often were recruited again into armed groups; it is reasonable to expect recidivism to be a similar outcome among women and girls under analogous circumstances returning to communities with the same stigmas.[75] Moreover, the widespread practice of sexual violence among violent extremist groups may serve to ingrain hypermasculine identities—as well as associated behaviors and attitudes such as entitlement to callous sex, glorification of violence, and attraction to danger—in men who lived with those groups. The result is multifold because men returning are likely to continue committing gender-based violence against women and girls and may be more vulnerable to recidivism in societies where such hypermasculine behavior is unacceptable.[76]

Trauma-informed care is also gender informed, reflecting the unique experience of women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities. Programs to address misogynistic behaviors, attitudes, and values associated with masculinity can marginalize militant conceptions of masculinity and encourage help-seeking behavior among men, which can help prevent the revictimization of those who were subjected to gender-based violence while in conflict.[77] Especially in communities that have experienced historical abuses by law enforcement and security-sector authorities, such programs can help women feel empowered with the agency to overcome the "injustice and deficit in dignity that women experience in their own societies."[78] But women should be viewed not just as victims and perpetrators; they are also rescuers.[79] "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."[80] As mothers, grandmothers, community gatekeepers, teachers, friends, and peacemakers, women have a stake in the reintegration of people disengaging from violent extremism. Mainstreaming gender and gender dynamics into disengagement programs by involving female community and faith leaders,

Although post-traumatic stress most commonly refers to persistent activation of cognitive fear responses, it can also activate responses of shame and guilt, which can in turn have significant implications for the disengagement of people who have contributed to violence or harm to others.

as well as women who have disengaged from violent extremism, can demonstrate sensitivity, empathy, and openness, reducing the burden of stigma and trauma.[81]

Although post-traumatic stress most commonly refers to persistent activation of cognitive fear responses, it can also activate responses of shame and guilt, which can in turn have significant implications for the disengagement of people who have contributed to violence or harm to others. Traumatic reintegration stressors may activate those shame responses, for which social avoidance is a common coping mechanism that can deter help-seeking behavior and amplify perceptions of alienation and exclusion. Alternatively, perceptions of being shamed unfairly could result in humiliation, rage directed at others, and a desire to seek revenge.[82] Shame ensures that people conform to social norms and activities when transgression of those norms could result in social exclusion—violent responses to regulate shame may be an evolutionary maladaptation to defend against that threat.[83] Indeed, shame's biological function may be linked to ensuring one remains included as part of a social group; shame is therefore threatening to one's identity and sense of self.[84]

Trauma-informed care minimizes the risk of replicating prior trauma dynamics, which has implications on treatment methods when shame is dominant. To treat trauma in which shame is circumscribed and fear is dominant, traditional methods that emphasize fear exposure and cognitive restructuring such as cognitive-behavioral therapy may be effective. However, exposure treatments for shame-dominant trauma that require the reliving of an event may result in anger at local communities perceived to be the cause of the shame and spark a desire for revenge.[85] In these cases, alternative treatments such as mind-body skills groups that incorporate meditation, guided imagery, breathing techniques, biofeedback, and self-expression exercises

may be effective at reducing anxiety and healing trauma in conflict-affected individuals.[86]

Antecedent trauma and adverse childhood events frequently contribute to a person's path into violent extremism; these too may need to be addressed to foster disengagement.[87] Although people who have experienced such trauma cannot be considered, wholesale, at risk of becoming engaged in violent extremism, engaging for some may be a way to ascribe meaning to the events.[88] For others, trauma and adversity destroys one's sense of self and worldview, facilitating feelings of alienation and victimization. Violent extremist groups instrumentalize trauma—as well as therapeutic elements of group cohesion and belonging such as spirituality, empowerment, and social support—not only to manipulate people into engaging, but also to trap those who already are engaged into remaining; long-term adverse mental health outcomes are often a result.[89] For example, white supremacists often include violence and dysfunction in their systematized family dynamics to "raise their children as tomorrow's warriors who will defend the white race against genocide."[90] Likewise, people who lived with the so-called Islamic State experienced grotesque physical violence as a routine part of daily life, including public executions, torture, rape, and armed conflict.[91] Moreover, post-traumatic stress has for decades been associated with postwar antisocial behavior among combatants, and the correlation between combat exposure and PTSD symptomology, including social avoidance and aggression, is well established.[92]

> The negative effects of exposure to such toxic stress . . . often become "deeply embedded in . . . neurobiology, with an astonishing range of long-term effects on cognition, emotion, and behavior." . . . Visible effects, such as for example, increased substance abuse, aggression, impaired cognition, emotion and behavior, lack of coping skills, poor stress management and mental illness may manifest [even] after a significant lag period.[93]

The implications are clear—trauma can lead to significant barriers to building social bonds, empathy, and a sense of belonging due to the erosion of trust and the neurobiological changes in brain function and processing that occur as a result.[94] And people who have engaged in violent extremism likely have been traumatized across several dimensions. Efforts to disengage people from violent extremism need to address this trauma to encourage help-seeking behavior and erode individual-level barriers to prosocial interactions.

Healing Trauma

Sitting in Shigeo, a Gaza suburb decimated by the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, James Gordon of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine is surrounded by eight children, each of whom has lost a father to the war. In the first of nine mind-body skills groups, they begin with slow, deep, soft belly breathing, after which the children are asked to create a drawing of themselves along with their biggest problem. One of them—a nine-year-old girl named Azhar—draws a scene of her home and family. On one side of her drawing are Israeli fighter planes dropping bombs on her home. At the foot of the building, drenched in blood, is her father. Not far away are two other bodies, also soaked with blood—"These are my uncles," she says. Nearby is another—Azhar's aunt. On the other side of the drawing is a small, frowning stick figure. "That's me," Azhar says.

In the next exercise, children are asked to draw the solution to their biggest problem. In many cases, these drawings are rather cheerful, depicting for instance, a road back home for a refugee family. In Azhar's drawing is a deep and dark-colored grave, and within it, a body. She explains: "I'm lying in my grave in my shroud. The Israelis have killed me. There is nothing for me in this life. I want to be with my father."

Over the next eight weeks, Azhar and her group learn a series of psychotherapy-informed self-help techniques from the Center for Mind-Body Medicine counselors. She practices soft belly breathing to sleep

and concentrate better. Using guided imagery, she imagines a safe and comfortable place for herself in Gaza. She engages in active physical techniques such as shaking, dancing, and fast deep breathing to break up patterns of tension in the body, which is in constant anticipation of further catastrophe.

Weeks later, in the last of these group meetings, Azhar creates another set of drawings. The first is a self-portrait. This time, Azhar situates herself in the middle of the page, no longer as a stick figure off to the side, but instead as a grown woman with a bright skirt. Coming from her heart is an arrow, which passes through another, larger heart on the page, across which "I love nature" is written. The arrow then passes through a flower with well-defined petals, and continues on toward a brightly colored tree. In the second picture, having been asked to draw what she would like to be, Azhar portrays herself in a white coat—"I am a heart doctor," she says. Around her neck is a stethoscope with its resonator sitting on the heart of a person lying on the table below her. "That is my patient," Azhar says. Beside her is a line of people. "Those are my other patients; they are waiting for me." Over the course of so many weeks working with the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, Azhar has transformed from a despairing child seeking only death after trauma to being able to open her heart to others and to herself.

Gordon describes how he has found, in his fifty-plus years of working in mind-body medicine, that trauma can be a doorway to discovering who people really are—that by reaching out, out of one's pain and suffering, the wounded can become the healer; that the traumas people experience can show them who they are, what is important to them, and may give them the gravity and compassion to help other people. "What I hope," Gordon explains,

> is that Azhar will be able to continue this like so many others I have seen . . . [how] our traumas have opened us to our fundamental humanness and to the humanness of

Eamonn Baker of the Towards Understanding and Healing Team organized a September 17, 2019 reconciliation event with Lee Lavis (second from right), a former British soldier, and Fiona Gallagher (right), whose brother was killed by a British soldier in 1976. (Photo by Andrew Testa/New York Times).

> everyone around us. And they have encouraged us, urged us, and called us to reach out to others with the compassion that we have learned through our own suffering.

Giving people an opportunity to talk about their vulnerability helps them to recognize that each one of us has the capacity for self-healing, and that we need other people to maximize that capacity.[95]

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND PEACEBUILDING

Shame, embarrassment, hopelessness, loss, grief, anxiety, hypermasculine social norms, resentment, poor self-awareness, preferences for self-reliance, and low confidence in health-care systems, treatment methods, or service providers can all be barriers to help-seeking behavior, even when trauma-informed care and behavioral health and psychosocial support (BHPSS) are available. These barriers present significant challenges for people

disengaging from violent extremism because such support is crucial to addressing cognitive or behavioral conditions that prevent people from engaging prosocially with community members and institutions. Indeed, where prosocial engagement is key to rehumanizing others, building bonds, and generating a sense of belonging, a willingness to engage prosocially is essential. Addressing traumas and shame that incite avoidance behavior can generate openings for such a willingness, but enabling help-seeking behavior and providing that care to individuals who may not want it can be challenging.

In communities with the technological capacity, implementing remote-access support systems may expand care to those who are embarrassed to seek help in public and to women in communities with highly structured gender norms, as well as to people who live in communities with little capacity to access

Evidence-based treatments can be adapted to be responsive to language and meanings, cultural patterns, and social values and norms in such a way that incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

BHPSS services otherwise.[96] Another approach may be to embed psychosocial support, trauma healing, and mental health literacy functions in other activities such as rituals or ceremonies, formal education systems, and recreational, cultural, art, and creative activities. Perhaps the most effective way to encourage help-seeking behavior is vicariously through gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are people who regularly interact with and are trusted by those disengaging from violent extremism—family members, friends, educators, or primary health-care providers—who can shepherd those in need toward BHPSS services. Although potential gatekeepers are not always likely to intervene because of fear of relational loss or cognitive biases that cloak warning signs, they can be cultivated through engagement and training. When gatekeepers are trained on behavioral challenges to expect, and how to directly provide basic interventions and trauma first aid, they are more likely to do so and will have a better understanding of when to refer individuals to professional BHPSS service providers.[97]

Of course, access to BHPSS often is not available or is limited, especially in non-Western countries. In some communities, access can be limited by stigmas against seeking mental health support or Western conceptions of care. Indeed, "much of the theory and practice of mental [and behavioral] health . . . have emerged from Western cultural traditions and Western understandings of the human condition" that focus primarily on individual symptoms and pathology rather than more communal or relational processes. The application of BHPSS to non-Western contexts requires careful analysis and calibration to local conceptions regarding etiology that integrates body, mind, and spiritual and religious dimensions; and cultural norms governing treatment-seeking processes.[98] In these contexts, even where capacity may be available, it is important to consider function over form; social norms may require

delivery of BHPSS to conform with cultural standards and local customs that have often evolved over centuries into tradition-based healing practices to address mental and behavioral health challenges in function if not in the language of Western clinical psychology.

Such practices can take many forms and be delivered a variety of ways—including community elders, religious leaders, and traditional healers—but often incorporate familiar treatment practices such as rituals, counseling, listening sessions, and communal dialogue that frequently mirror clinically tested or empirically validated principles of intervention.[99] Indeed, indigenous rituals in a number of contexts incorporate psycho-education and spiritual guidance, goal setting and expectation management, relationship building and person-centered interactions guided by empathy and congruence, symbolic exposure to the traumatic event, externalization of symptoms, and other therapeutic factors shown to decrease traumatic stress symptoms.[100] These are "positive community resources" that can provide at least some essential functions of trauma-informed BHPSS in acceptable and locally familiar ways.[101] Additionally, evidence-based treatments can be adapted to be responsive to language and meanings, cultural patterns, and social values and norms in such a way that incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches by beginning with theory and procedures based on clinical trials that are subjected to scrutiny and input by local stakeholders.[102]

Access to care is also often limited by a scarcity of human capacity, especially in rural or conflict-affected communities. In these cases, community-based care administered by community members trained in BHPSS techniques and principles have shown promise. These programs are designed to address the needs of traditionally underserved populations by addressing "needs in ways that are accessible and acceptable," focusing

on strengths and resilience factors in addition to risk factors and deficits, and melding evidence-based treatments with recovery-oriented ethos and practical ethics.[103] BHPSS training is often provided to nonspecialist health workers to integrate BHPSS services into primary care systems to scale up and extend the reach of behavioral health capacity and provide focused and specialized treatments for serious and chronic behavioral health diagnoses.[104] In other contexts, even primary health-care facilities may be inadequate or inaccessible, and community-based programs can fill the gap where neither behavioral nor mental health services exist. Community-based BHPSS programs can build capacity for basic BHPSS services and empower community and family support by providing training and psycho-education to family members, community elders and leaders, religious actors, social workers, and educators. Platforms for delivery can include schools, churches, NGO offices, prisons, community centers, public spaces, and remote technologies.

Tradition-Based Rituals and Trauma Healing

In 1992, when Patrick was six years old, his father was abducted and killed by the Lord's Resistance Army when it began to infiltrate northern Uganda. Afterward, Patrick displayed chronic depression symptoms and withdrew socially. Seven years later, he too was abducted. Within weeks, he was forced to kill four men who attempted to escape captivity; within a month, he began training as a child soldier; within two months, he participated in an attack on a convoy where he witnessed soldiers kill twenty people with axes. During the three years of his captivity, Patrick was tortured and in constant fear of being killed, forced to torture prisoners, and participated in combat. In 2003, he was wounded by government forces, captured, and eventually released into a child soldier rehabilitation program.

After release, Patrick experienced severe nightmares several times a week, daily flashbacks and manifestations of people he had killed, and other somatic symptoms of trauma. To relieve the symptoms, Patrick sought out a healer to perform a cleansing ritual to rid himself of the spirits of those he had killed. Over the course of several days, Patrick and his family participated in a series of symbolic activities—including leaving the village and returning; stepping on an egg, which symbolizes purity; being fed; pronouncements by elders of cleansing; community participation; hypnotic and intense dancing; and ritualized slaughter—that ultimately resulted in the spirits agreeing to leave Patrick and instead inhabit a goat, which was then killed.

Notably, this ritual consisted of several clinically validated therapeutic elements. Before it was conducted, the traditional healer and community elders engaged with Patrick on psycho-education and spiritual guidance to provide him with clear expectations and build trust. The ritual itself provided symbolic exposure to the traumatic event, externalization of symptoms, decoupling past from future, and social connectedness. After the ritual, Patrick's symptoms decreased significantly—his nightmares immediately went from weekly to monthly, then disappeared almost entirely; manifestations of those he had killed ceased; his desire for social activities began to increase; and he became future oriented. After fifteen months, Patrick was no longer clinically depressed, and over the course of follow-up interviews that spanned the following two years, he no longer met the criteria for a Western-style PTSD diagnosis.[105]

Improving Access to Care

Given the more than ten million people displaced by the ongoing Syrian war and nearly sixty million others displaced elsewhere around the world, millions are in need of treatment for psychological traumas associated with forced displacement or violence. Yet few who need it ever receive treatment, either out of fear of stigmatization or the inaccessibility of mental health resources.

Beyond Conflict, a nonprofit that combines behavioral science and humanitarian work, created the *Field Guide for Barefoot Psychology* to address the challenge. Currently being piloted in the Za'atri

refugee camp in Jordan, the *Guide* follows the story of two Syrian siblings enduring conflict and migration. Through storytelling and vignettes of the siblings' lives, it illustrates otherwise complex scientific concepts. It unpacks the biological and psychological processes associated with life in conflict and forced migration—fear, anxiety, stress, trauma, guilt, shame, hopelessness—and normalizes many of these experiences through storytelling that frames these issues as "common responses of the brain and the body to abnormal life events." It takes an asset-based approach, attempting to cultivate resilience through "the science of neuroplasticity, belonging, and post-traumatic growth."[106]

In low-capacity environments, civil society often fills the gaps that government services cannot reach. In northern Nigeria, the NEEM Foundation addresses the mental health, rehabilitation, and reintegration needs of victims of Boko Haram, as well as people who have disengaged from the group. To address a critical resource limitation that prevents adequate access to care—for example Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, had only one psychologist for every 375,000 residents in 2017—the NEEM Foundation trains "lay counselors (including gender-based violence and expressive therapy specialists), peace coaches, and religious leaders who can assist in rehabilitation, reintegration, and general psychosocial support."[107]

Socio-Recreational Activities and Well-Being

Socio-recreational and cultural activities such as interest groups, activity groups, problem-based groups, and structured groups can be effective at providing psychosocial support that encourages prosocial engagement by providing peer support, listening sessions, referral services, and encouraging inclusive, equal, and respectful relationships.

Creative and art-based activities can have profound effects on mental and behavioral well-being through their ability to transform suffering, connect individuals, and enable participants to voice the unspeakable.

> Furthermore, recent neuroscientific and psychological, neuroendocrine and immunological studies have claimed that participation in cultural and artistic activities can have a positive impact at the organic level, containing the negative outcomes of protracted distress and empowering the immune response. According to the most recent studies of neuroaesthetics, the vision and creation of artistic forms solicit the mirror neurons and stimulate empathy.

Rituals and celebrations can be particularly potent in promoting psychosocial well-being by helping overcome isolation using metaphors and symbols to indirectly express painful experiences, contextualize trauma in a shared history and heritage, and validate and demarcate transformations.[108]

Communal and Social Barriers

Removing individual barriers to help-seeking and prosocial behavior, however, is like building a bridge to nowhere if open spaces in which interactions with those disengaging are welcome do not exist. Indeed, the absence of a tangible and viable alternative social group is a significant barrier to exiting a host of roles, and communities may be hesitant to welcome back people who have engaged in violent extremism.

Communities affected by violent extremism and people returning from violent extremist conflicts may be understandably angry and fearful, and thus may stigmatize those returning. After all, violent extremist groups are guilty of committing heinous crimes, cleansing entire ethnicities, perpetrating mass violence targeting civilians, and inflicting untold trauma on communities. It is therefore not surprising that stigmatizing people perceived as being involved could be the first reaction. Such a response, however, is not helpful in the long term for either the community or the people returning.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

For decades, terrorists have been portrayed in the media and by politicians as a singular threat and as pariahs to be feared and imprisoned for life, exiled, or killed. Terrorism and violent extremism were framed as a global and existential threat. Even in liberal democracies, government programs established new rules for handling people accused of aiding or abetting terrorism, at times brushing aside civil rights and long-held legal norms. The policies and laws that followed tested the balance between constitutional rights and liberal values with security needs, placing primacy on "winning the war" and retribution against those who participated in violent extremist groups. A host of countries adopted similar measures. In Malaysia, people

suspected of terrorist-related crimes can be held more or less indefinitely without charge or trial. In the United Kingdom, authorities can refuse entry to citizens suspected of terrorist-related activities. In Germany, authorities can replace passports with identity cards that are not valid for travel abroad. In Tajikistan, citizens younger than thirty-five are barred from traveling to Mecca or Medina. Further, governments and law enforcement agencies worldwide created terrorist watch lists from which removal procedures were nontransparent at best and nonexistent at worst. As a result, *terrorist* and *violent extremist* became designations for which redemption was not possible. As far as society is concerned, once a terrorist, forever a terrorist.

This fear dehumanizes those who have engaged in violent extremism, and the resulting stigma closes off avenues of acceptance into communities even after disengagement, foreclosing the availability of an alternative identity and reinforcing the otherness that keep people from successfully disengaging. But people disengaging from violent extremism are not the only ones for whom stigma is a challenge. For people living with HIV/AIDS, people who use drugs, and people affected by the criminal justice system, language has been used to reduce stigma and aid in their recovery. Indeed, words matter when it comes to encouraging inclusive social engagements, and language is a powerful tool to shape perceptions and behavior. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff famously wrote, "If I tell you 'Don't think of an elephant!', you'll think of an elephant."[109] Lakoff was illustrating a cognitive effect of language whereby words trigger the brain to use shortcuts, or "frames," to jump to a given conclusion or learned reaction. The same holds true for *terrorist*. No one wants to engage with a terrorist.

In some circumstances, of course, it is important to acknowledge a person's past—situations such as criminal justice proceedings, redemption rituals, or disengagement programs in which such history is directly relevant as an essential element.[110] But though a spade should be called a spade, and acts of terrorism should of course be labeled as just that, "terrorist" language is often deployed not because it is relevant but because it is politically expedient. Such language often reflects a political impulse to appear staunch on national security or criminal justice. In some more nefarious platforms, it can also be a xenophobic dog whistle that preys on fear and anger, activates jingoist emotional responses, and mobilizes the segments of society most unwilling to engage with people disengaging from violent extremism. Rhetoric that reinforces perceptions of exclusion and buttresses the social divisions that fuel violence weakens the ability of communities to effectively protect themselves by focusing on a nonnegotiable identity clash rather than the substantive and underlying issues at stake.

Rather than backward-looking language that emphasizes conflict and responsibility, reconciliation requires forward-looking language that imagines a future, acknowledges mutual responsibility, and encourages introspection about a group's identity—then broadens it.[111] In criminal justice, social work, and public health, people-first language has been used to rehumanize marginalized groups, reducing the burden of stigma, presenting opportunities for social learning, and challenging the alienating narratives that generate resentment. Emphasizing a person's personhood can harness the cognitive and neurobiological power of language to ease open spaces for engagement by influencing social attitudes and self-identity. Instead, used casually as part of a daily vernacular, terms such as *terrorist*, *Jihadi*, *violent extremist*, and *fighter*, even when preceded by *ex-* or *former*, activate the frames associated with the war on terror that have been socialized in many communities since 2001 and reinforce—both for society and for the individual—the very identities that they are attempting to shed.

In 1974, for example, subjects were randomly divided into groups and shown the same seven films of automobile accidents, after which they answered questions about the films. Those who were asked how fast the cars were going when they smashed into each other provided significantly higher speed estimates than those asked an almost identical question that replaced the verb *smashed* with *collided*, *bumped*, *contacted*, or *hit*. A week later, on reexamination, the participants whose question used the verb *smashed* were more likely to report having seen broken glass in the films, even though broken glass was not in fact present.[112]

Fast forward to 2011.

> Crime is a beast / virus ravaging the city of Addison. Five years ago Addison was in good shape, with no obvious vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, in the past five years the city's defense systems have weakened, and the city has succumbed to crime. Today, there are more than 55,000 criminal incidents a year—up by more than 10,000 per year. There is a worry that if the city does not regain its strength soon, even more serious problems may start to develop.
>
> Judgment: In your opinion, what does Addison need to do to reduce crime?[113]

In this study, subjects were randomly divided and given this scenario, one group receiving a version that described crime in Addison as a *beast* and the other as a *virus*. This change in adjectives, and the connotations that went along with it, influenced the solutions each group recommended. Those who heard crime framed as a beast were significantly more likely to recommend enforcement responses than those for whom crime was framed as a virus, who were more likely to recommend social-reform responses.[114]

These two studies demonstrate the neurological power of language to influence peoples' perceptions and preferred policy approaches to respond to social challenges.

Society functions as a looking glass whereby people tend to conform to the labels they are given because those labels identify opportunities and funnel people into certain roles: when mainstream society alienates, subcultures such as violent extremist groups welcome.

ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES

Society functions as a looking glass whereby people tend to conform to the labels they are given because those labels identify opportunities and funnel people into certain roles: when mainstream society alienates, subcultures such as violent extremist groups welcome. Society is eager to label people who could pose a security risk as deviant but is loath to label them as reformed or rehabilitated: it takes only one deviant action to stigmatize a person, but *rehabilitated* is a status earned by demonstrating social conformity over a sustained period.[115] It is a status whereby the criteria for eligibility is inherently subjective—because how long a person needs to "cease and desist" before they are labeled rehabilitated and what behaviors or attitudes are considered acceptable or unacceptable are undefined and negotiated on a case-by-case basis.[116]

Although fear and skepticism about the sincerity of people disengaging from violent extremism are understandable, an unwillingness to give them a chance and welcome interactions in good faith could become a self-fulfilling prophecy that results in recidivism.[117]

Long-term disengagement involves transforming a person's identity and sense of self, and "drawing on the symbolic interactionist notion of the 'looking-glass self-concept', [labeling theory] suggests that [an] . . . individual will come to view himself based upon what he believes other people think he is."[118] When people disengage from violent extremism—particularly when they return from having participated in conflict—they face a crisis of identity that catalyzes finding new meaning in life, reassigning new meaning to past experiences, and searching for a new social identity.[119] This crisis presents opportunities for rehabilitation. Labeling a person disengaging from violent extremism as *rehabilitated* may itself contribute to the disengagement process.[120] This has been validated by several well-known studies stretching back to the

1970s. In one, researchers informed patients that they had devised a mechanism to determine who would be likely to recover from alcohol dependency and who would not. In reality, no such mechanism existed. A random selection of participants in the study were told that, based on the mechanism, they were likely to succeed; the study results showed that these participants were significantly more likely to give up alcohol than the control group.[121]

More recent and perhaps more relevant experience demonstrates that social rituals and ceremonies that publicly acknowledge and reflect an identity transformation may be especially effective at sustainable desistence or disengagement.[122] In Rwanda, for example, thousands of people who participated in the 1994 genocide are beginning to be released from prison and reintegrate into their communities, to live among victims of the violence. Such a reintegration is an intense crisis of identity, and many brace themselves, expecting to be stigmatized and ostracized. Often they find instead that they are embraced into the community with simple rituals, such as being greeted with a Fanta or alcohol—including by the victims.[123]

JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Rituals, ceremonies, and rites of passage that symbolically mark a person's transition back into society serve a much broader social function than encouraging help-seeking and prosocial behavior among individuals. They also are involved in the healing and reconciliation process at the community level. Indeed, tradition-based rituals have deep roots in social ethos and community identities, and cleansing or purification rituals performed on soldiers and other people who have participated in armed conflict or violence can "re-establish harmony between ex-soldiers and community members."[124]

Especially in communities that have experienced violent extremism, trauma will compound the stigma, anger, and

fear against those who are returning or disengaging. Even in communities not directly affected by violent extremism, intense feelings of betrayal and experiences of losing children and other community members to a conflict zone may themselves be sources of communal trauma. Trauma-informed peacebuilding aproaches such as transformative mediation and narrative mediation may also be effective for reducing stigma and healing collective trauma.[125] Rituals can begin to heal psychosocial traumas and provide a pathway for moving forward together. Symbolic ceremonies can provide a tangible break from past actions and identities experienced not only by the individual but also by the community; they can transform identities, create new shared identities, and heal wounds from conflict and crime. One researcher described the power of one such ceremony from Sierra Leone that "created an emotionally charged atmosphere that succeeded in moving many of the participants and spectators . . . and which arguably opened an avenue for reconciliation and lasting peace."[126] Rituals involving the community have the ability to give expression and meaning to human experiences, and to nurture human relationships by enabling both individuals and communities to envision each other as *we*.[127]

Often it can be challenging to collect evidence from a foreign battlefield in a way that upholds judicial and evidentiary standards, making prosecution difficult. In other cases, lack of evidence or perceptions that an individual played a minor role could result in little or no prison time. And, of course, children who were trafficked or born into a conflict must be considered victims by the law.[128] But bureaucratic and practical reasons for not pursuing criminal justice often will fail to provide a sense of justice to communities that feel aggrieved. In many cases, tradition-based rites of redemption or community-based dispute settlement mechanisms can begin the healing process.

Although justice mechanisms not based in rule of law may not provide retributional forms of justice, tradition-based redemption systems have a greater ability to orient attention to the experiences of victims to heal "breaches, [redress] imbalances, [and restore] broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offense."[129]

Whereas other crimes involve perpetrators and direct victims, violent extremism targets entire societies. Even community members who were not the direct targets of a terrorist attack may feel as though they have a stake in the response to a person who has been engaged in violent extremism.[130] Restoration in such cases is not individual but instead collective. Restorative justice, which is "primarily oriented toward repairing the individual, relational, and social harm caused by [an] offence," can leverage tradition-based and communal redemption systems and empower communities to participate in healing and restoration.[131]

Community-based systems that involve respectful dialogue can drive credible narratives of redemption and blame in a way that more rigid, rational-legalistic state institutions cannot.[132] Dialogues that emphasize respect, solidarity, and active responsibility can derive meaning from tragedy or transgression, which is associated with positive outcomes among victims and perpetrators alike. Indeed, "people often demonstrate resilience, growth, and prosocial behaviors in response to extremely negative life events," to which they often search to ascribe meaning. Credible, compassionate, meaningful, and respectful narratives that acknowledge responsibility and offer reparations are essential to reconciliation, but developing them without minimizing the harm caused or triggering defensive reactions from perpetrators is difficult. Dialogues can engage in building redemption narratives, which "can reflect events from the . . . past [and] imbue meaning for the present." "If perpetrators perceive their past wrongdoing or the aftermath as catalyzing some positive change in their own lives, this may reduce the wrongdoing's threat to their identities, allowing perpetrators to respond

prosocially, rather than defensively." Studies show that "engaging in redemption narratives can promote reconciliatory intentions among perpetrators (e.g., collective guilt, willingness to make reparations), with seemingly little defensive responses from victims."[133] Compassionate and empathetic language encourages complex thinking, which has been shown to promote "mutual understanding and can predict more peaceful outcomes to conflict."[134] Narratives that emphasize complexity can contextualize actions within a social ecology, acknowledging legitimate grievances without deflecting agency or accountability.

Box 2.
HEALING PROPERTIES OF RITUALS

When traditional forms of justice are difficult to execute, whether because of challenges collecting evidence or gaps in terrorism legislation, community rituals can provide an expedient and sometimes more constructive alternative:[a]

- Rituals help people interact in new ways. Communicating mainly though symbols, senses, and emotions rather than words, people are empowered to perform symbolic actions and interact in new ways. The ritual space enables people to "perform their humanity," calming their emotions, channeling them, and expressing them in a safe way.
- Rituals help create "safe spaces" in the midst of conflict. Because rituals take place in a space separate from the troubles of everyday life, the safe space they create gives participants the opportunity "to listen and speak more thoughtfully and carefully about the problems at hand."
- Rituals help form and transform worldviews. As participants collectively cultivate values and reshape memories, the ritual process serves as a prism through which participants view the world. In this way, rituals can provide a new lens that emphasizes relationships and the big picture.
- Rituals help form and transform identities. Rituals can build, affirm, and heal identities, improving the self-esteem of individual participants, and increasing awareness of their ability to act in the world and in what ways. Ritualized rites of passage transform identities by encouraging the creation of an inclusive, shared identity for people in conflict. By focusing on the common ground that exists between them, people in conflict can "use ritual to legitimize or reinvent their identity in ways that express their interdependence."
- Rituals help form and transform relationships. In doing so, they create opportunities for people to become aware of their shared humanity and interdependence. Rituals thus build bridges between individuals and provide a structured platform for them to interact with one another and begin to view each other as fellow problem-solvers.

Source: Quotes from Ali Gohar and Lisa Schrich, "Ritual and Symbol in Justice and Peacebuilding," in *Creating the Third Force: Indigenous Processes of Peacemaking*, ed. Hamdesa Tuso and Maureen P. Flaherty (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 457–58.

Structural Barriers

Violent extremism is a form of violent conflict. It does not spring out of nowhere. It is instead the result of frustrated agency, of social exclusion, marginalization, and fragmentation, and of broken governance that has failed a segment of the population. These challenges cannot be ignored. Individual choices and social dynamics are circumscribed by structural realities. As a form of collective action, violent extremism may be the spark that ignites the prairie fire. People often falsify their private preferences to conform with the apparent preferences of the mainstream until a spark exposes the existence of a "latent bandwagon," or a critical mass of people who are also discontent with the status quo. Such a critical mass can grow into a "prairie fire" as that discontent manifests mass movements, both violent and nonviolent.[135]

Violent extremism often signifies the existence of such discontent; it can be the leading edge in the mobilization of collective action with the potential to galvanize a tipping point by which others affected could join in widespread political violence. Pursuing a broader effort to promote social cohesion that goes beyond a return to the status quo where relationships were frayed and instead strengthens the social fabric through collaborative relationships can build more resilient communities. Resilient communities not only prevent violent extremism but also create an environment in which disengagement from violent extremism can be sustained: that is, they produce peaceful societies more broadly.

> Three types of social connections are critical to a resilient community in relation to violent extremism. . . . Social connection within and between communities specifically mitigate risk factors associated with violent extremism; *within* communities refers to individuals that share similar social identities (termed *social bonding)*, and *between* communities refers to groups composed of individuals with diverse social identities but who share a common sense of community in some other way (termed *social bridging*). . . . The role of social connection between communities and institutions or governing bodies (termed *social linking*) provides an opportunity for addressing social injustice.[136]

Addressing individual and cognitive as well as social and communal barriers to prosocial engagement can facilitate reconciliation within and among social groups, fostering social bonding and social bridging. But social linking cannot occur in communities where fragmentations along religious, ethnic, or other socioeconomic lines prevail. In such conditions, the ability to inclusively engage, reintegrate, or reconcile with people disengaging from violent extremism for whom the alternative identity offered is itself marginalized will remain stunted. Ensuring "access to decision-making mechanisms of community, institutional, and political structures" that can fully acknowledge, aggregate, articulate, and appropriately channel legitimate grievances can validate lived and shared experiences and provide people who are disengaging with stake in the social and political milieu through nonviolent avenues to pursue their goals.[137]

Generalized social trust—in those institutions as well as in other community members—is vital to ensure that societies and institutions remain inclusive and capable of responding to the needs of people disengaging from violent extremism, as well as those of the community at large. Indeed, "fear reduces tolerance for outgroups, increases support for hawkish . . . policies and decreases political participation," all of which undermine social cohesion and community resilience. Longitudinal and experimental studies have found that people "with higher levels of generalized [social] trust . . . had lower

Wedding ceremonies for former Tamil Tiger rebel fighters—such as this in September 2013—have been part of the government's rehabilitation program in the aftermath of Sri Lanka's quarter-century-long civil war. (Photo by Eranga Jayawardena/AP)

levels of fear" after being confronted with a terrorist threat or attack.[138] Building trust, then, is an important component of building cohesion and resilience.

Here too, peacebuilding contributions to disengagement and reconciliation can pay dividends. Dialogues can "bridge the gulf of mistrust between the civilian police and local communities" by outlining human security needs and promoting cooperation and understanding.[139] When institutional capacity is low and grievances against authorities run high, civil society is often the bridge to affected individuals and communities,

offering the trust and networks that governments lack.[140] Sincerely engaging and building capacity of women, educators, religious actors, health systems, and other civil society organizations can simultaneously provide direct support and services to people disengaging from violent extremism and foster resilience by empowering communities to address components of the social environment that may contribute to violent radicalization.[141] Conceived in this way, preventing violent extremism and disengaging from violent extremism are not at opposite ends of a continuum; instead, they close the circle and disrupt the cycle of violence.

De-Exceptionalization

Violent extremism is both an expression of violent conflict and a form of violence. Instead of applying peacebuilding and violence prevention practices, however, approaches to disengaging people from violent extremism have been primarily linear, derived from security and law enforcement imperatives and flawed assumptions.

Like other forms of violence, extremist violence is a behavioral challenge. It is only one of a host of adverse outcomes from similar sets of risk factors and social ecologies. The literature on criminality, gang involvement, illicit drug use, addiction, self-harm, intimate violence, poor population health, and other forms of political violence highlight strikingly similar themes regarding community resilience, stigma, marginalization, relative depravation, access to services, trauma and adverse childhood events, and social and political grievances. Public health is an inherently multidisciplinary practice that incorporates complexity and social ecologies as a matter of course. This is what approaches such as behavioral health, violence prevention, and harm reduction are based on and what advanced public health methods such as causal inference in epidemiology and complex systems modeling excel at untangling. "A public health framework offers the interdisciplinary approach that is needed to disentangle the context-specific individual and societal [dynamics involved], as well as to identify clusters of services and multiple levels of action" from which to engage.[142] Despite the securitization of violent extremism, it is not unique among behavioral challenges. Responses should mirror existing approaches to similar challenges that use social-ecological frameworks to leverage risk and protective factors existing in local communities, minimize risks and adverse effects of high-risk activities by increasing access to support services and building

capacity and resilience in affected communities, and offer nonviolent alternatives by applying the principles presented in this report.

Center behavioral change. "There can be a physical disengagement from terrorist activity, but not concomitant change or reduction in ideological support."[143] Moreover, focusing on why someone's beliefs and values are wrong can fortify their sense of righteousness, making it even more difficult to change their mind. Instead, behavioral science "suggests building and maintaining relationships with individuals who support and reinforce non-deviant behavior is vital to constructing a non-criminal identity."[144]

Facilitate prosocial engagement. Sustained positive and inclusive engagement between those disengaging and community members and institutions provides a guide star to generate empathy, build social bonds, promote a sense of belonging, and offer an alternative identity that rejects violence as a way to resolve conflict, express agency, or pursue a goal.

Consider the entire social ecology. People mobilize to engagement as the result of complex interactions among dynamics from across a host of social and cognitive dimensions. Likewise, disengagement opportunities may exist in each of those dimensions. For example,

> Mental health and education professionals have increasingly turned towards building programs based in community assets, rather than focusing on deficits/problems, and recognizing the need to leverage strengths across the different levels of the social ecology. Strengths-based programming effectively engages families, leverages existing resources, and diminishes problems of stigma associated with more problem-focused approaches. Assuming a

People from Mayange village, in Rwanda, sit and watch during a trial of a *gacaca* court on August 9, 2007. Rwanda relies on a traditional justice system known as gacaca, which means "court on the grass," to try those accused of genocide and other crimes. (Photo by Riccardo Gangale/AP)

social-ecological approach allows for strengths from different levels of the social ecology like individual, community, and cultural, to be both acknowledged and leveraged.[145]

Disengagement efforts that consider not only individuals but also relationships, peer networks, communities, institutions, and political structures can expand the constellation of resilience factors likely to bring behavioral change.[146]

Apply trauma-informed care. Trauma may often present a significant barrier to disengagement, and several layers need to be addressed. These include antecedent trauma that may have contributed to a person's initial mobilization to engage in violent extremism, trauma experienced while engaged in violent extremism, and trauma associated with reintegration into local communities. All of these can result in social avoidance responses that amplify feelings of isolation and exclusion and forestall help-seeking behavior. Collective trauma within communities affected by violent extremism may also need to be addressed, even healed, to facilitate sincere engagement with people who are disengaging.

Ensure access to care. Cognitive and emotional states that people may often experience during the disengagement process—such as hopelessness, loss, fear, grief, shame and humiliation, frustrated agency, anxiety, and trauma—can intensify feelings of isolation and alienation that can in turn contribute to recidivism.[147] Behavioral health and psychosocial support mechanisms can address these challenges, but access to care is often limited due to stigma, capacity, or know-how. Leveraging technology, functions of tradition-based healing practices, community-based delivery platforms, and training and education can expand access.

Watch your language. Given the importance of reducing stigma to facilitate prosocial engagement, it is critical to avoid stigmatizing language. Language has the neurological power to shape perceptions. Deliberately placing the person before the label—such as people disengaging from violent extremism—can avoid reinforcing the very identities people are disengaging from.

Label the transformation. Symbols are key to identity formation, and people tend to conform to the behavioral expectations of the labels society gives them. Symbolically demarcating the transition to rehabilitated can in itself be a powerful tool contributing to the disengagement process.

Facilitate justice and accountability. Justice has two faces, one criminal and retributive, the other social and restorative. When criminal justice is not possible or prudent, restorative justice is crucial to redemption, healing, and reconciliation. Restorative justice involves "the notion that because crime hurts, justice should heal. . . . [And] no progressive social movement is likely to be effective without . . . promoting the just acknowledgement of [harm]" and responsibility for it.[148] Community-based rituals, rights, and ceremonies can acknowledge the harm and ensure the acceptance of responsibility to restore dignity to victims.[149] Compassionate and respectful dialogue that facilitates a narrative that gives meaning, acknowledges harm, promotes redemption, and opens spaces in which a new identity is offered is a powerful tool for disengagement from violent extremism.

Link with prevention efforts. People disengaging from violent extremism often are doing so in the same environment in which they were initially mobilized to engage. Preventing a return to violence is paramount. This requires acknowledging and beginning to address the legitimate grievances and structural, political, and economic dynamics and risk factors that may have contributed to violent extremism to begin with. Although communities are critical stakeholders, the burden of these reforms cannot be placed entirely on civil society. Governments at all levels, from national to municipal, must approach communities with transparency and sincerity to build trust, diagnose challenges, and work together to devise and implement solutions.

Communal, political, and interpersonal violence and conflict often predate a person's engagement in violent extremism. Conflicts and legitimate grievances also often persist after their period of engagement, as do behavioral health challenges and other adverse outcomes. Peacebuilding and public health provide approaches to address these issues in an integrated way because they span individual, relational, communal, and institutional dimensions. Indeed, peacebuilding and public health already address these challenges in other contexts—armed conflict, fragile states, gang and interpersonal violence, population health, social cohesion, community resilience. De-exceptionalizing violent extremism applies these same practices for people disengaging from violent extremism. Rather than marvel at how intractable the complexity of violent extremism is, the area of practice needs to engage with the other social disciplines that have had proven success at addressing similar social challenges.

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