

ESSAY CONTRIBUTION

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Measuring and understanding
the impact of terrorism

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MANAGING, REHABILITATING & REINTEGRATING TERRORISM OFFENDERS

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As countries become better at detecting, investigating and prosecuting terrorism suspects, including returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), prison services across the world are faced with a growing number of terrorism offenders in their institutions. The presence of these violent extremist offenders (VEOs) in the justice system poses new challenges to prison and probation services as well as to a range of other stakeholders and intervention providers involved in their management, rehabilitation and reintegration. From a fear of violent extremist contagion and recruitment among other prisoners to concerns around former VEOs reintegrating back into communities, the perceived challenges are many and the tolerance for failure is extremely low.

First, a reality check: prisons have not generally become a 'finishing school for terrorists' where violent extremist radicalisation spreads like wildfire.¹⁴ Numbers are still relatively low with evidence of VEOs radicalising or recruiting others in detention environments and the risk of post-release recidivism often anecdotal rather than based on substantial qualitative and quantitative data.¹⁵ Mark Hamm described it best when coining the term 'the spectacular few': building on more than 25 years of prison research, he concludes that only a small minority of the inmate population is at risk of engaging in terrorist activities during or after imprisonment.¹⁶ Nevertheless, recent research analysing profiles of 79 European violent extremists with criminal pasts concluded that 45 of them had been incarcerated prior to their radicalisation with 12 of them being judged to have gone

through this process during their time in prison.¹⁷ Furthermore, violent extremism risk assessments and corresponding interventions are still in the early stages of development and testing: there is no gold standard or silver bullet, not in the least because these tools are highly context-specific, require considerable tailoring and depend on the availability of a range of resources (material, expertise, finances etc.). Lastly, there is no magic solution or quick fix to effectively reintegrating VEOs; not even when spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a very elaborate program like Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Bin Naif Center for Counseling and Care. While the Centre may claim a success rate between 80-90 percent, questions remain about the accuracy of this number¹⁸ considering recidivism rates for regular crimes are between 20-75 percent in most countries.¹⁹

Herein lies the principal problem: terrorism is considered so extraordinary that responses to it must be likewise extraordinary. Well-established management methods and intervention approaches that have proven effective with other types of offenders are often deemed insufficient, or not even considered, with politicians and the wider public demanding quick strong responses.²⁰ The fear and risk averseness that often underlie these demands further fuels the stigmatisation of VEOs, especially during re-entry, which can seriously impede their successful reintegration back into society.

GOOD PRACTICES IN MANAGING, REHABILITATING AND REINTEGRATING VEOs

Given this lack of data, prevailing

misperceptions and the limited resources available to prison and probation services – what can be done to better manage terrorism offenders, prevent radicalisation to violent extremism in prisons and facilitate the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs into society?

GET THE BASICS RIGHT FIRST

Firstly, it is key that general prison management principles and good practices are implemented. Prisons must be safe, secure and well-resourced environments in which prisoners are treated humanely and their human rights respected in accordance with international prison standards, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). Staff should receive appropriate and tailored training and support, including in developing constructive and professional relationships with VEOs, regardless of differences in staff-prisoner backgrounds. It is crucial that security measures complement rather than stifle intervention efforts and that corruption is actively prevented. These basic conditions are vital for the management of all offenders, including VEOs, who often see the state as their enemy and expect to be mistreated. With many countries facing significant resource challenges that prohibit the development of more comprehensive VEO management and rehabilitation programs, improving these aspects will help create an environment less conducive to radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism.

DEFINE POLICY AND OBJECTIVES

The management, rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs requires a well-articulated policy framework with specific objectives, actions and actors. First, it is important to clarify whether the final aim is disengagement (a behavioral move away from a group, cause or ideology that justifies violence to bring about political or social change) or de-radicalisation (a cognitive move away from supporting the use of violence to achieve political or social change). This will inform the theory

of change behind the policy and the final desired outcome. Second, policies and related programs need to carefully consider both short-term security needs and long-term rehabilitation aims. In the short-term, the focus during detention is generally on preventing further radicalisation of terrorism offenders, the radicalisation and recruitment of other inmates and attacks inside or outside of prison. However, long-term rehabilitation interventions seek to minimise the risk of post-release re-radicalisation, prevent the radicalisation or recruitment of others and achieve low rates of recidivism. Finally, it is key that progress indicators and monitoring mechanisms are included in the program's design in order to effectively evaluate impact.

STRUCTURALLY IMPLEMENT RISK AND NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

In order to appropriately inform classification, housing, and services decisions and to tailor individualised interventions and treatment protocols (including for special categories of offenders such as youth and women),²¹ inmates should undergo comprehensive risk and needs assessments. This will help prison authorities understand what specific motives and circumstances may have contributed to an individual's offending behavior but also provide insights into potential needs and protective factors. For example, the motivations and needs of a young VEO, responsible for sharing terrorist material in their own country without fully understanding the impact, are likely to be very different and will require different responses from a battle-hardened FTF returning from a conflict zone with severe trauma. In turn, this information can help tailor management decisions and interventions, especially when risk assessments are repeated over time to help identify the impact of specific actions. Risk and needs assessment tools should be selected based on their relevance, reliability and feasibility; the use of empirically based, rationally selected risk factors; and their sensitivity to local and individual contexts. It is important that these approaches are implemented

consistently by well-trained staff and are based on effective information sharing processes between relevant agencies and good case management systems.

Several violent extremism-specific risk assessment tools have been developed over the past years, including Violent Extremism Risk Assessment Version 2 (VERA 2) and the United Kingdom's Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+). Evaluations are ongoing around the validity and effectiveness of these relatively new instruments and prison services should take into account their context-specific and resource-intensive nature. Authorities should also consider the potential application of existing validated tools for assessing violence risk in youth (e.g. Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY)) and adults (e.g. Historical Clinical Risk Management-20 (HCR-20) and Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG)) for VEOs in combination with other similarly validated psycho-social and historical risk and needs assessment approaches. However, typically these tools are not based and validated on samples including any known individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences. Therefore there is a danger in confidently applying these assessments to a group for which they are not validated. Ultimately, risk assessments must follow a case formulation approach in which the circumstances of each individual are carefully and cautiously assessed alongside emerging knowledge and evidence about the types of factors that may contribute to risk or protection.

TARGET RISK REDUCTION INTERVENTIONS

When designing and delivering interventions that reduce the risks posed by VEOs, during and after their imprisonment, more consideration should be given to the applicability of underlying doctrines and approaches of programs proven to prevent different types of reoffending.²² Key 'what-works' principles are now well-established in criminological and forensic psychological literature and practice; and first and foremost is the risk-need-responsivity model.²³ Essentially this model

dictates that 'programs should;

1. target those who are deemed of higher risk of reoffending and of committing serious harm (risk principle),
2. target factors that directly contribute to offending (need principle), and
3. be delivered in a way and style that maximizes learning for individuals (responsivity principle).²⁴

Programs based on these three principles have been found to be more effective than those that are not but their application to interventions aimed at addressing violent extremism seems to have hardly been developed or examined.²⁵

Risk reduction interventions need to be targeted through assessments, have clearly defined goals and desired outcomes and be evaluated frequently, and adjusted accordingly. They need to explicitly target factors and circumstances that directly contributed to an individual's engagement and offending and be responsive to the individual prisoner's needs, capabilities and risk profile. To this end, a range of intervention approaches should be made available where possible, including mentoring programs, psycho-social support, education, vocational training, religious counseling, arts and sports. Those providing the interventions, be it governmental practitioners or independent external providers, need to be carefully selected, vetted, trained, coordinated and supported in their intervention delivery.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT TO REINTEGRATION

Finally, prison and probation services and other stakeholders need to provide continuity and consistency of interventions during and after re-entry, assisting the reintegrating individual in those areas that assessments and previous interventions have deemed most salient. Continued education, housing, job placement and other elements that facilitate successful reintegration into society should also be considered where appropriate. Resettlement plans need to be prepared prior to release and ideally with the

VEO's contributions. Appropriate and proportionate release conditions should enable opportunities for successful reintegration while maintaining security. The involvement of families, friends, and positive mentors is hugely important as they can discourage interest and involvement in violent extremist groups and provide credible voices to challenge violent extremist viewpoints. They will need to be supported throughout the reintegration process in recognising that some family and friends could also be a negative influence or carry responsibility for initial involvement and offending. Actors should also consider widening the focus of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts beyond VEOs to include all those affected by violent extremism. For example, children who were kidnapped by terrorists or born while in a conflict zone.

It is imperative that various government agencies, including prison and probation services, law enforcement, local government, social and health services and educational institutions work closely together to support the VEO's reintegration process; their roles and responsibilities should be clearly established, information should be shared regularly and engagement with the reintegrating individual should be consistent across all stakeholders. Furthermore, community organisations and other civil society actors should be involved in designing, delivering and evaluating reintegration programs and aftercare support since they often engender high levels of trust, credibility, and expertise among their local community. However, it is important that they receive the required legal and political space, policy guidance and resources. The private sector also has a role to play in terms of providing traineeships and job placements, which is especially important for reintegrating VEOs given the societal fear towards violent extremists. More generally, investments in community awareness around violent extremism, including through the media, are vital to reduce stigmatisation and socialise the public to the need to successfully reintegrate terrorism offenders.

CONCLUSION

There is a clear urgency to address radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism in prisons and effectively reintegrate terrorism offenders. Yet the lack of understanding of the extent of the problem has led many governments to implement hasty solutions based on untested assumptions and anecdotal evidence. Much can already be done in terms of improvements to basic infrastructure, services and staff training to build on international good practices of fostering a prison environment that is less conducive to radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism. However, to truly optimise risk reduction interventions and reintegration programs for VEOs, serious investments are needed to enhance our understanding of both the causes of and solutions to the problem at hand. This includes carefully considering how underlying principles and interventions proven to prevent different types of reoffending are also applicable to VEOs. It is important to recognise that each VEO presents different risks, needs and engagement challenges that require bespoke approaches for policies and programs to have a long-term meaningful impact.
