



## Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers (STREET): A Case Study in Government-Community Partnership and Direct Intervention to Counter Violent Extremism

Jack Barclay\*

### Overview

This policy brief profiles a community counterradicalization program in the United Kingdom known as STREET (Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers).

STREET, which was created and is run largely by members of a Muslim community in south London, works with at-risk youth to divert them from involvement in antisocial behavior, gang violence, and violent extremism, and toward leading more productive and positive lives.

This policy brief examines how STREET operates and why it appears to have been so successful in steering young people away from involvement in non-desired behaviors and with violent extremist movements in particular.

In so doing, the policy brief attempts to assess what good-practice lessons can be learned from the STREET approach that might be applicable in the nascent counterradicalization strategies and programs (particularly direct intervention at the individual level) in development by UN member states.

The STREET mentoring approach, aspects of which will be familiar to those with experience in countergang work, are combined with deep theological expertise and some innovative counterradicalization techniques to considerable effect, especially in cases where

individuals demonstrate support for extremist jihadist ideologies.

Since its inception in 2006, STREET has become a go-to program for many statutory agencies in London (and further afield) dealing with individuals considered at risk of violent radicalization. The program boasts a zero percent recidivism rate—an extraordinary claim, although one backed unanimously by the sources who the author interviewed for this report.

### Background: The UK Government's "Prevent" Strategy

In 2007 the UK government launched a new strategy to counter violent extremism. Known as "Prevent," it formed one of the four pillars of the country's national counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST. Since its launch, Prevent has been reviewed and refocused twice as a consequence of the often difficult lessons learned from trying to implement a sensitive set of policies.

The overall aim of Prevent is to reduce the risk of terrorism to the United Kingdom and its interests overseas by stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. The strategy encompasses measures to challenge ideologies behind violent extremism while supporting "mainstream" voices, disrupting those promoting violent extremism, supporting

*"[STREET] aims to connect with disaffected young people at risk of involvement in antisocial behavior, gang violence, or violent extremism. Through programs of interventions uniquely tailored to each individual, STREET attempts to divert those youngsters away from criminality and other negative patterns of behavior."*

**Jack Barclay** is the Director of Scanner Associates, a counter-extremism consultancy that works with governments to help them better understand and challenge violent extremist radicalisation. He is based in the United Kingdom.

communities vulnerable to radicalization, and addressing the broader social grievances often exploited by extremist ideologues for radicalization purposes.

The UK government sees the formation of credible, effective partnerships with community groups as being critical to the success of Prevent. In many cases, such groups possess the reach into their communities and the levels of trust often lacked by statutory agencies. For this reason, a key plank of Prevent has been to support the creation of these partnerships. In some cases, this has involved the government providing direct financial assistance to groups expressing a wish to address issues of violent radicalization in their communities.

Of particular importance in the context of this policy brief, however, are projects supported by Prevent that directly engage specific individuals who, for one reason or another, have come to the attention of statutory agencies or community representatives as being directly vulnerable to violent radicalization. Such individuals may be referred to a government-run program called “Channel,” which attempts to support and mentor at-risk individuals and divert them from involvement with extremism.

Channel provides a mechanism for supporting those who may be vulnerable to violent extremist radicalization by assessing the nature and the extent of the potential risk and, where necessary, providing an appropriate support package tailored to an individual’s needs. A multiagency panel decides on the most appropriate action to support individuals, taking into account their specific circumstances. In some cases, Channel coordinators will request the assistance of community partners selected for their ability to connect with and influence that individual. STREET is one such partner.

## What is STREET?

STREET is a youth engagement project based in south London. Launched in 2006, it aims to connect with disaffected young people at risk of involvement in antisocial behavior, gang violence, or violent extremism. Through programs of interventions uniquely tailored to each individual, STREET attempts to divert those youngsters away from criminality and other negative patterns of behavior and toward leading more positive and productive lifestyles.

STREET has attracted considerable attention from the media, academia, and foreign and domestic government organizations for its successful work with young people at risk of extremist jihadist radicalization, as well as its mentoring of individuals convicted under UK terrorism legislation. As this policy brief will explain, however, this represents only one narrow aspect of the work of STREET, which also has experience of working with gang members; youngsters from broken homes and challenging family backgrounds; individuals with emotional problems, battling substance abuse, or excluded from school; and others on the margins of society lacking support and connections to education, employment, or training.

In addition to its work in south London, STREET has also conducted off-site work with local schools, youth offender institutions, and prisons and other community-based counterradicalization initiatives established elsewhere in the United Kingdom, passing on lessons learned from its own experiences working with at-risk young people.

In Brixton, the immediate south London locale where STREET is based, many of its referrals come from among the area’s large Afro-Caribbean community, one that has been deeply affected by drugs and gang violence over the last 25 years. Some from this community are recent converts to Islam, who

sometimes initially lack a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding of their new religious beliefs and are thus potentially vulnerable to the influence of charismatic extremist ideologues. Many STREET staff and mentors are themselves Muslim converts or individuals from the local community, who therefore have a personal appreciation of such issues. Some in particular have strong connections to the south London Salafi community, which has a track record of challenging attempts by extremist ideologues to radicalize and recruit local Muslim youth.

Alyas Karmani, a co-director of STREET who joined the programme three years after its inception, explained its origins:

STREET was started back in 2006, when we [members of the local Muslim community] realized that youth in Lambeth and in other parts of south London were at risk of a number of factors—criminality or getting involved in violent gangs—and they were also at risk of violent extremism, involvement in extremist groups who justify using violence through Islamic means and in particular through a distorted interpretation of Islam.

### The STREET Model

STREET takes a broader approach to its work with vulnerable young people than might initially be assumed by those viewing it through the lens of counterextremism. Many of the youngsters mentored by STREET have experienced a range of problems, including violence, emotional, or physical abuse and neglect, which is often reflected in a sense of isolation, disempowerment, and low self-esteem and consequently in low aspirations—all conditions that can leave a youngster open to the influence of street gangs and extremists. As one public sector worker familiar with London gang intervention programmes

explains, “A lot of these young people [referrals] are coming from pretty tough backgrounds. You can see why some of them end up getting into gangs ... and I’d include the extremists in that category. For some of them, it’s probably the first time they’d met another person who offered them a hot dinner and seemed to give a damn about them.”

STREET has met the multidimensional nature of the problem with a wide-ranging response tailored to each individual’s needs and circumstances. At any given time, STREET says it deals with up to 35–40 young men consisting of self-referrals as well as referrals from statutory partners. Many have widely differing needs. Depending on the individual in question, STREET interventions can encompass emotional well-being support such as counseling, social and welfare support (help with employment or training), personal development, and faith-based work, which STREET describes as “using religious teaching on citizenship and personal conduct to motivate personal reform and encourage positive citizenship” (this will be discussed in more detail below). A contextual understanding of Islamic teachings on issues such as citizenship are considered by STREET mentors to be effective in inoculating a young Muslim, particularly converts or others with limited knowledge of their religion, against Islamist extremist ideologies and indoctrination.

Overall, this holistic approach to intervention aims to help a young person reconnect with and find a stake in society instead of remaining marginalized, where he might find a sense of affinity, support, and belonging with a criminal or Islamist extremist group.

As Alyas Karmani explains, “Once we connect with them, it’s vital for us that we empower them, so they realize they have a role to play as young Muslims in British society.”

*“STREET takes a broader approach to its work with vulnerable young people than might initially be assumed by those viewing it through the lens of counter-extremism.”*

*“STREET’s effectiveness stems from the combination of the backgrounds and cultural awareness of its staff and the depth of their theological knowledge.”*

STREET interventions are designed to achieve this by

- challenging the influences and decision-making that cause an individual to legitimize violence, whether as part of a gang or an extremist group;
- inspiring and developing individuals with personal skills that give them greater confidence and self-belief and hence a resistance to negative and recidivist influences;
- creating a safe space in which referrals can debate the problems and issues bothering them, addressing the feelings of disempowerment and marginalization often leveraged by extremist groups for radicalization purposes; and
- unlocking what STREET terms the “social capital” of individuals through provision of education and vocational training.

Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker, the founder and managing director of STREET, illustrates the breadth of the STREET approach with reference to a recent case in which the referral—a man with a criminal conviction and extremist Islamist sympathies—was rehabilitated through a program in which theological discourse initially played little part: “I was helping him with employment, his housing situation, getting his curfew order sorted out. He realized ‘these people are helping me.’ There wasn’t much religion involved in that. But through all that, that’s my hook to try to deal with some of the ideological issues.”

In another case, Baker says, STREET successfully mentored a young man who had raised the concerns of authorities for his violent extremist sympathies and had a track record of using physical violence. However, STREET’s intervention ultimately required a minimal ideological component; those involved in his case quickly identified that a range of social

issues and a mental health problem represented the most urgent challenge, not a need for theological discourse.

In other cases, however, intensive theological interventions may be required to challenge the views of referrals with a strong adherence to extremist jihadist ideology (see ‘Focused Theological Interventions’ below).

### **Embedded in the Community**

According to STREET, many youngsters connect with the program through self-referral, not just referral from statutory bodies such as the police or social services. This, STREET claims, is evidence of the credibility it enjoys among local youth; it is an organization rooted in the local community, which can be approached in confidence and whose staff understand (in some cases from personal experience) the “lived reality” of many youngsters in south London.

As Alyas Karmani explains, “Our strapline is ‘for you from people like you.’ That sums up what we’re about. Because we’re embedded in the community, we can understand the lived reality, the changing situation, and conditions on the ground. We’re right at the interface, and that helps us work with the young people out there.”

He adds, “We have a credible and competent group of youth workers and mentors. Many of them have come from similar backgrounds to the people they are engaging. They understand their worldview and in many cases have also been affected by the same issues as them. This allows us to access areas other agencies might consider difficult to reach.”

Robert Lambert, a former head of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Muslim Contact Unit, has had more than 10 years of close contact with STREET and the south London Salafi community, both as a police

officer and subsequently as a scholar at Exeter University's European Muslim Research Centre. He claims STREET's effectiveness stems from the combination of the backgrounds and cultural awareness of its staff and the depth of their theological knowledge. This, he argues, makes them almost uniquely positioned to connect with their young, south London audience and then, having done so, to successfully challenge the views of those demonstrating extremist influences: "I think it's their street skills; I would put that at number one on the list of importance. They [STREET] might say it's their religious understanding, but from seeing them at close quarters, it's a combination [of the two] that matters. Their religious position wouldn't count for very much without the street skills, the cultural understanding. That seems to me to be the crucial factor when dealing with an individual."

Lambert cited as an example how Salafis in Brixton, including individuals now associated with STREET, addressed the radicalization of members of their own community by the Jamaican extremist preacher Abdullah al-Faisal al-Jamaiki:

Faisal was very streetwise. He had this reputation as the Jamaican gangster who found Islam, and so he could deliver a very powerful message. He could say to young kids in the area, "Become a Muslim and follow me, and you don't have to give up on the crime as long as what you're doing is taking money from the Kuffar [infidels]." You need people with the street skills as well as the religious knowledge to combat people like that.

He adds, "I have seen some very well-meaning Muslims who want to challenge violent extremism who give it a go and fail because they're not equipped; they don't have the street credibility. I've also seen Muslims who have that street credibility but lack the requisite religious position."

Lambert believes that the Salafi orientation of some in STREET is particularly important in giving it the theological tools needed to challenge the type of violent jihadist ideology espoused by groups such as al-Qaida. He says,

If you are trying to help people like the youth who have gone into Faisal's world, for example, these are people who have adopted a variation of Salafism. That's a crucial point. They [violent jihadist ideologues] aren't distorting Sufism, they're not distorting Deobandi or Bareilvi ideology. They're distorting Salafism. A lot of Salafis disagree with that obviously. [But] it's doomed to failure in a situation like that when well-meaning Muslims of other sects try to influence that sort of audience—they're absolute outsiders.

However, Baker emphasizes that STREET staff are selected for their skills and qualifications beyond their religious background and expertise. He says, "We require our staff to have qualifications in teaching, counseling, and mentoring. If our staff members couldn't, for example, adhere to practicing their faith in the context of being a citizen in British society today, we couldn't employ them."

### Operational Independence

The mechanism by which STREET liaises and cooperates with statutory bodies is judged by its founders to be critical to its continued effectiveness. Robust terms of engagement, developed collaboratively by STREET and frontline agencies, allow STREET to work extremely productively with the MPS and Youth Offender Service (YOS), among others, while retaining a considerable level of operational independence. This helps STREET to preserve some youth credibility as an organization that can be trusted to be "on their side" rather than being "part of the system." It also helps STREET counter the



claims by extremist groups that it has “sold out” Muslim communities by cooperating with the government against the interests of its co-religionists.

When STREET and frontline agencies began discussing how they could best cooperate, STREET’s founders recognized that unless they established a position as equal, independent partners at an early stage, they risked being seen as an organization merely functioning as the community-level “hands” of government counterextremism or, as Baker explains, the bottom level of “a top-down, hierarchical ‘suspect community’ model.” He says, “The initial concept and terms of reference needed to be robust from the beginning. Partners couldn’t be bullied by the other partners. This sends a strong message to the community [about independence] in addition to holding your own with the other agencies.”

STREET, the MPS (specifically the MPS Channel team), and YOS established a formal mechanism that facilitated cooperation and information sharing in the interests of certain individual referrals but maintained STREET’s operational independence and hence its credibility. For example, according to STREET, case notes and details of an individual presenting himself directly to STREET would not necessarily be shared with the other partners as a matter of course, unless STREET felt that their knowledge of the case or their involvement was necessary. Details of a young person referred to the MPS Channel team by police colleagues or another statutory agency might be passed to STREET to assess whether they could be of assistance. If STREET agreed to take the case, information on the individual and their progress would be shared with the MPS Channel team but not necessarily with the YOS or other agencies. Similarly, a referral to STREET by the YOS would not be routinely discussed with the MPS Channel team unless the specific circumstances of that case required their involvement.

Baker explains that “obviously we share information on people already in the system. We are referred cases and we work in association with the statutory bodies.” But he also stresses,

We said [to authorities], “[W]e are not going to give you new referrals, we are not going to report our referrals to you.” We do share information with the police, but there is no suggestion that this is a formal part of the process. What we agreed was that there would be a triangle. The YOS, [MPS] Channel [team], and STREET. For example, if the YOS referred cases to us, we wouldn’t necessarily refer them to [the MPS] Channel [team]; we would deal with it ourselves. Independence is important. We choose who we want to work with and how we work with them. That’s the level of autonomy.

There are obvious exceptions to the rule. Baker stressed that if he or his colleagues became aware that a referral was about to commit a serious crime, for example a terrorism-related offense, they would naturally report their concerns to authorities. Nevertheless, such a system still requires significant levels of trust on all sides. In the case of STREET, this was only cemented after several years of engagement involving careful relationship building among specific personalities in the statutory agencies and individuals in the Brixton Muslim community. This underscores two important issues with implications for counterextremism programming. First, the kinds of partnerships necessary for effective cooperation cannot be built overnight; and second, top-down models of program delivery, where the community partner acts largely on direct referrals from statutory agencies, may not always be the most appropriate or effective partnership mechanism. The model adopted by statutory bodies and STREET relies heavily on each party divulging a degree of necessary and important information to partners,

*“The model adopted by statutory bodies and STREET relies heavily on each party divulging a degree of necessary and important information to partners, trusting that the system will work in the best interests of everyone in spite of no single organization having complete oversight over any of the other organization’s activities.”*

trusting that the system will work in the best interests of everyone in spite of no single organization having complete oversight over any of the other organization's activities.

## Risk Assessment and Case Studies

STREET interventions are underpinned by a detailed risk assessment that profiles an individual's background and vulnerabilities and that informs the development of an intervention strategy tailored to them.

The following assessment framework was developed by STREET for application to individuals identified at risk of violent extremism. STREET directors ensure the framework is applied by staff members who have been trained in its use and have core competencies in assessing at least three of the five "influencer factors" listed below.

The framework, an overview of which STREET has permitted the author to reproduce here, assesses individuals based on the following five core influencer factors:

1. **Emotional Well-Being:** factors related to emotional vulnerability; poor emotional well-being; incidence of mental health problems; poor relationships; personal experience of trauma, violence, and abuse that was unresolved; and the need for social and emotional support.
2. **Social Exclusion and Estrangement:** factors related to identity, inclusion, and integration, related to not fitting into British society; the search for personal and group identity; feeling dislocated and like an outsider; and experiencing racism and disillusionment with democratic process and institutions.
3. **Perceived Grievance and Injustice:** factors related to experienced discrimination, disadvantage, humiliation, racism, and Islamophobia on a personal and group level.
4. **Foreign Policy:** factors related to the

perceived detrimental impact of Western foreign policy in the Muslim world, in particular in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and the perceived exploitation and occupation of Muslim lands and subjugation of fellow Muslims.

5. **Religious Extremist Ideology:** factors related to indoctrination by extremist methodology, promotion and propagation of that ideology, adherence to an Islamic group, loyalty to an emir, and deep conviction in ideology.

These five factors are subdivided into 66 subfactors. These subfactors are assessed to determine the overall level of risk and the relative level of risk related to each broad influencer factor. Examples of subfactors include

- age and personal maturity;
- degree of religious indoctrination;
- extent of formal Islamic education;
- relations with close family members;
- degree of support of family members for individual's ideological outlook;
- views on integration and place in society (does the individual feel part of British society, and if not, why not);
- criminal offender history, if any;
- mental health;
- any issues with addiction;
- perceptions of racism and hate crime, and discrimination;
- degree of politicization; and
- membership or affiliation with Islamic groups, if any.

In the same way that evidence of these factors is used to identify risk, evidence of counterfactors may be used to identify resilience. Hence, the above influencer factors of risk can be countered against the following resilience factors:

1. **Emotional Resilience:** ability to overcome psychosocial distress, anxiety, anger, and

frustration and to maintain a strong sense of self-esteem and worth as well as the ability to identify distress and seek treatment and therapy.

2. **Social Resilience:** ability to challenge social exclusion and alienation and promote inclusion, civic responsibility, and social integration.
3. **Persecution Resilience:** ability to deal positively with perceived and actual discrimination and related grievances.
4. **Geopolitical Resilience:** ability to address foreign policy grievances through democratic and nonviolent channels.
5. **Theological Resilience:** ability to identify Islamic extremist views and ideology that promote violence and to challenge them with mainstream and moderate orthodox views.

The assessment framework also makes a distinction between vulnerability factors or influencers and actual risk factors.

**Vulnerability:** where there is predisposition, tendency, likelihood, or strong contextual influencers that may lead to an actual risk.

**Risk:** where there is actual evidence of risk and it is present as a behavior or highly likely to be expressed as behavior.

Through this assessment framework, STREET is able to develop a schematic related to “push” or “pull” influences on the individual. This will show the relative strength of influencer factors against counterfactors and risks against resilience factors. This in turn allows STREET to develop an intervention program suited to the needs of that individual and focused on strengthening key resilience factors.

### Case Studies

An example of a multifaceted STREET intervention based on the above risk assessment

process can be seen in the case of a 24-year-old referral from West Yorkshire. In order to protect his identity, this policy brief will refer to him as “AK.”

Convicted in 2007 for offenses under the Terrorism Act, for which he served an 18-month jail sentence in Belmarsh and Wakefield prisons, AK was released on license until January 2011. He was previously associated with the perpetrators of the 21 July 2007 terrorist attacks on the London transport network and was convicted of “possessing materials and documents that could be used for terrorist purposes.”

AK’s initial assessment revealed the following picture:

Influencing Factor	Level of Risk
Emotional Well Being	Low to medium—AK was emotionally secure and had no previous mental health issues even though he had served a jail sentence in Belmarsh prison.
Social Inclusion	Low to medium—AK was well integrated and did not show strong patterns of identity conflict, lack of belonging, or social exclusion.
Perceived Grievance	Medium-high—Due to feeling that his arrest and detention were not warranted, that he was labeled as an offender under the Adolescent and Children’s Trust (TACT), and that this label will hold for the rest of his life.
Extremist Ideology	Medium—AK had extreme political views and was strongly influenced by extremist preacher Anwar al-Awlaki and other jihadist ideology and had associations with 21/7 individuals.
Foreign Policy	High—AK had very strong anti-Western and anti-Indian views relating to what he described as the “occupation” of Kashmir and the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.



STREET began working with AK in 2009 and now claim he has completely renounced his former extremist views. He has been reconnected with employment opportunities and has expressed a greater sense of inclusion in British society, in stark contrast to the exclusion he had previously felt, and has developed stronger ties to his family and a desire to separate himself completely from extremist social circles.

During his association with STREET, AK requested a mentor who could provide religious guidance from a Salafi perspective and that this person should be an imam. The mentoring challenged AK on his ideological views and provided what STREET described as “alternative positive ways to engage in activism to address foreign policy and perceived grievances he had held.”

In addition to the theological discussion, however, STREET was required to address other issues and grievances held by AK that threatened his rehabilitation. AK had become demotivated by the strict license conditions under which he had been placed by authorities, in particular the restrictive curfew hours that had created tensions with his offender manager and raised the risk that he would be recalled to prison. Through liaison with the offender manager and probation staff, STREET says it managed to ensure that AK continued to cooperate with his supervision and “addressed many of the tensions and negative concerns that he had and prevented any possible recall.”

According to a STREET assessment, AK “has identified the mentoring as the single most important factor in his supervision and the factor that has most impact on changing his views and educating in relation to the correct Islamic actions and beliefs. He also identified it as the factor that resolved conflicts with his OM [offender manager] and encouraged him to co-operate and comply with his strict license conditions.”

Although at the time of this writing, STREET’s intensive one-on-one mentoring of AK has come to an end, he still maintains frequent contact with his mentor.

Although the above example concerns an individual whose mentoring involved a strong theological component, Baker explains that much of the work of STREET is not conducted from a religious perspective. Many of the individuals referred to STREET present with a range of issues not directly related to their outlook on Islamic ideologies. However, he acknowledges the value of religion in channeling youth toward more positive patterns of behavior. He says, “We have a clear demarcation between religion and the other things we do. We use faith to channel people to positive action. It’s [a] very powerful motivator for doing that. Faith is an important driver and medium for influencing behavior. In some cases, it’s a light touch; and in other cases, it involves full theological deconstruction.”

Alyas Karmani adds, “One intervention is encouraging spirituality and Islamic adab [manners]. Yes, the people we work with have often been Salafi. What they [referrals] become are observant British Muslims comfortable with the duality of being both British and Muslim.”

The case of a 26-year-old referral recently handled by STREET illustrates the challenges of rehabilitating TACT offenders with a strong extremist jihadist outlook, but it also underscores the importance of not addressing ideological issues in isolation. The referral, to be referenced as “SA,” is of Afro-Caribbean mixed heritage and a convert to Islam from south London. He received a conviction under the Terrorism Act with a large group of Muslim men who were found to be supporting terrorism. SA served a two-year custodial sentence in Belmarsh and Wakefield prisons.

Part of the challenge presented by SA was his senior-level membership in an extremist group

*“Much of the work of STREET is not conducted from a religious perspective. Many of the individuals referred to STREET present with a range of issues not directly related to their outlook on Islamic ideologies.”*

and close association with prominent “jihadist extremist recruiters” including Sheikh Abu Hamza al-Masri. As will be explained, however, SA presented with a range of other issues as well, not least of which was the difficulty he was experiencing in his personal life, in particular the stress associated with having two young families.

STREET began to work with SA in a one-on-one setting while he was still in prison and more intensively—up to three times a week—following his release from prison in September 2010. His case workers developed a package of support that included

- Career planning and job searching: After his release from prison, SA was unemployed. STREET successfully found a job for him and encouraged his strong interest in developing skills in counseling and youth work.
- Family and parenting guidance: Although SA was assessed as emotionally stable and generally positive about his future, the pressures of having two young families was considered to be a particular vulnerability, so he was provided with parenting workshops and mentoring on social and interpersonal issues in order to encourage greater social resilience.
- Social support: SA articulated a wish to separate himself from his extremist past and affiliations, so STREET provided him with access to new social networks separate from the extremists with whom he had previously associated.
- Ideological/spiritual support: To help SA complete his stated wish to break with his extremist past, intensive one-on-one theological “deconstruction” work was undertaken to help address his views on important Islamic topics and to allow him to be able to articulate to others that he no longer held extremist views.

At the time of this writing, according to STREET, SA had exhibited no recidivist behavior and had not reoffended.

### Focused Theological Interventions

Where a focused theological component is necessary to counter an individual’s extremist outlook, STREET has a range of interventions available. STREET has developed an extensive database of counterextremist material to comprehensively challenge jihadist extremist ideology at the detailed theological level. STREET mentors hold intensive one-on-one sessions with referrals to devalue the narratives and ideological platforms of groups such as al-Qaida, using scriptural evidences and references to classical and contemporary authorities to debunk al-Qaida judgments on issues such as the *Fiq* (jurisprudence) of violent jihad, suicide bombing, and violence against non-Muslims.

Of particular note is STREET’s Deconstruct Programme. This is described by STREET as “a process of de-radicalization which deconstructs religious extremist propaganda and replaces it with a mainstream, moderate perspective, thereby creating resilience against violent extremism.”

The Deconstruct Programme recognizes that extremist media, such as videos produced by al-Qaida, are often sophisticated pieces of strategic communication that deliver a range of political, ideological, and theological messages. When combined, these constitute a powerful cocktail of incitement to violence. Some of these messages are subliminal and are often not obvious to the intended audience of Muslim youth. The Deconstruct Programme therefore contains a media component that equips the viewer with sufficient media literacy to understand how al-Qaida uses new media to present its arguments in a compelling way and thus manipulate its audience.

The theological strand to this process then involves devaluing specific al-Qaida arguments in light of “evidences” from the Quran and Sunnah. Each argument is the subject of focused counternarrative discussion, and its flaws and deviations exposed. Ultimately, the referral becomes aware that the interpretation presented by the extremists is only one interpretation, rather than the only interpretation.

### Measurements of Effectiveness

As described above, STREET has developed a risk assessment framework that not only assesses an individual’s unique vulnerabilities, but also allows case workers to identify emerging signs in an individual’s behavior and dialogue that indicate growing resilience to these vulnerabilities, whether they be social, theological, political, or otherwise. The development of this resilience can be tracked to the point where case workers feel intensive mentoring is no longer necessary.

What also assists authorities and STREET in measuring the lasting impact of interventions is that following the end of their mentoring period, many referrals choose to retain links to their case workers and the social networks to which STREET connects them in order to help them make a clean break with their previous extremist or gang affiliations. Individuals do not simply “drop off the radar” when their mentoring period is complete. If a statutory agency was involved in an individual’s referral, STREET is therefore able to report back to that agency on the individual’s progress and highlight any issues of concern.

STREET has claimed a zero percent recidivism rate from its interventions. According to STREET, none of those individuals completing their mentoring programs has gone on to engage in reoffending, much less involvement in violent

extremism. Although the author did not have complete and unfettered access to case work and data held by STREET in order to test the veracity of this extraordinary claim, the organization’s purported 100 percent success rate is supported without contradiction by the testimonials of multiple public sector officials with whom the author has spoken and whose roles in each case make them well placed to assess the impact of STREET interventions. The author is not aware of any reliable open-source data that challenges what appears to be the consensus view of public sector sources concerning STREET’s effectiveness.

### Potential Good Practice Lessons

STREET appears to be an effective example of direct intervention counterradicalization for a number of reasons.

**Existing background in countering violent extremism:** Founding members of STREET are members of the local community in south London who had been active in trying to challenge gang violence and extremism in the area long before the arrival of the Prevent strategy. This helped them counter claims by extremist groups that STREET was a government “front organization.”

This may suggest that groups whose involvement in counterradicalization predates the development of government strategies may be particularly effective allies, as they can leverage their long-standing positions of trust and respect in their community to engage productively with at-risk individuals. This is not to say that newly formed community partnerships with little prior experience of counterradicalization would prove ineffective. However, it is worth considering that if preexisting groups with such experience are few in number, then this may impact the speed with which governments can establish genuinely effective partnerships and begin to engage seriously in counterradicalization work at the community level.

**Operational independence:** Although STREET enjoys a relationship of trust and cooperation with statutory partners, it retains a large measure of autonomy, taking on and managing its own cases alongside referrals from the MPS, YOS, and other agencies. This helps STREET maintain trust and credibility among its target audience and resist charges from extremists that it is merely the community-facing end of an intrusive government policy. This arrangement requires high levels of mutual trust and was made possible only after years of engagement between key personalities in STREET and statutory partners.

The partnership arrangement developed by STREET, while seemingly effective, relies on considerable levels of trust between all parties, particularly given that no single agency will have complete visibility of the data held by any given partner. One of the dividends of such a mechanism is that the credibility and effectiveness of a community partnership can be maximized if mechanisms for cooperation with government preserve a large measure of the community partner's autonomy. A direct intervention program such as STREET cannot be seen by its target audience to merely be doing the bidding of government agencies. Some governments may feel, however, that the risks to security from a lack of absolute oversight outweigh the potential benefits. In the case of STREET, a concern voiced by some statutory partners in the early stages of cooperation was of the risk that an individual taken on by STREET, but whose details would not necessarily be shared with authorities, might later regress to a position of support for or engagement in violent extremism with serious political and security implications. To date, however, it should be stressed that such a situation has never arisen.

Furthermore, if the success of STREET was partially the result of several years of relationship building between statutory

agencies and the community, then it again raises the question of how fast governments can realistically expect to establish credible and effective partnerships for counterradicalization and how quickly they can make real progress in combating violent radicalization in vulnerable communities.

**Strong community position:** STREET is based in the heart of the community it serves and is close to the issues affecting it. It is run by individuals raised in this community, many of whom have personal experience of the problems faced by those youth whom they are mentoring. They are well known and trusted by young people, which often allows them to connect with the youth more easily than statutory partners.

This suggests that the ideal community partner should be one rooted in the community, not an outside organization. The individuals involved must have credibility and cultural and religious affinity with the group they are trying to engage.

**Detailed religious knowledge and understanding:** STREET has staff with very considerable breadth and depth of Islamic education from a Salafi perspective, as well as considerable expertise in the ideology of extremist groups such as al-Qaida. They are thus well positioned to offer detailed critiques and refutations of al-Qaida's claims at the theological level.

An ability to theologically deconstruct al-Qaida's religious arguments is essential to the success of interventions where the individual displays a strong violent jihadist outlook. Although this need not necessarily be from a Salafi position, it may be advantageous in some cases, as the ideology of al-Qaida arguably is built on a distortion of Salafi precepts, and some individuals may find their mentors less credible if they do not share a Salafi outlook. Those involved in counterradicalization of this

kind must have intimate knowledge of the arguments of the extremists and counterarguments from a perspective of the Quran and Sunnah and the judgments of classical and contemporary Islamic scholars and jurists.

**Methodological rigor:** The STREET risk assessment methodology allows its staff to develop a detailed profile of a referral and an understanding of issues that create vulnerabilities to violent radicalization. The same framework also allows case workers to track the progress of an individual during mentoring and assess more clearly the degree to which interventions are having a positive impact.

The effectiveness of many forms of counterradicalization may prove difficult to directly measure, but the success of direct intervention programs can be accurately determined if robust risk assessment processes are used. These processes must be rigorous enough to generate an understanding of the full range of issues affecting an individual, as these details will underpin the later development of a tailored intervention strategy.

**Full-spectrum approach to intervention:** STREET recognizes that the issues that render an individual vulnerable to the influences of criminal gangs and extremist groups are many and varied and can often include a wide range of personal and social difficulties. For this reason, STREET engagement and mentoring packages are developed to address all these issues; violent extremist sympathies are not tackled in isolation.

This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to counterradicalization. A narrow focus on hard theological deconstruction, for example, may not address the full range of issues affecting an individual and that, if left unresolved, may continue to leave that person

vulnerable to the influence of criminal and extremist groups.

**Trained staff and mentors:** STREET employs properly trained and qualified staff and mentors, many with qualifications in youth work, teaching, and counseling.

In order to fully appreciate and address the range of issues likely to be covered in the course of a package of interventions, case worker experience and qualifications must extend beyond areas such as cultural awareness and an in-depth knowledge of religion.

### STREET and Wider Issues of Consideration for Government-Community Partnerships

In 2011 the new coalition government in the United Kingdom ceased its funding of STREET entirely. Officials have not publicly articulated the reasoning behind this decision. It possibly relates to the outcome of a government review of which community groups should be considered appropriate partners in counterradicalization. In June 2011, the government articulated plans for a new “muscular liberalism,” stating explicitly that it would not work with or support the counterextremism projects of community groups if they failed to adhere to “British values,” which it described as “the values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and mutual respect and tolerance of different faith groups.” In the view of some influential opinion-formers in the government, the Salafi orientation of many in STREET placed them at natural odds with these core values, rendering them unsuitable partners. This assertion is obviously highly contentious and one that has been firmly rejected by STREET’s founders and directors.

The prevailing view of sources interviewed for this policy brief was that STREET had probably fallen victim to a shift in political

*“The example of STREET raises important, wider questions for policymakers in UN member states developing their own domestic counterextremism strategies.”*



outlook between the previous Labour government and that of a new Conservative-led administration. Because many of those involved with STREET hail from the south London Salafi community, it has been suggested that this placed them within the orbit of those Islamic movements in the United Kingdom whom some policymakers considered to be “non-violent extremists” and hence part of the problem rather than the solution. According to this argument, the government could not be seen to be funding a counterextremism program run by a group which itself was regarded by it as extremist. Consequently, government funding for STREET was ceased. This has not curtailed STREET activities altogether, but its founders claim the loss of government financial support has already significantly reduced its capacity and reach, with various projects shuttered and many of its staff made redundant.

It is likely that, in the short term, Channel interventions in south London will have to rely more heavily on the use of statutory agencies, at least until similarly credible and effective partners to STREET can be found. That such partnerships can be found is not a given. It may be premature at this stage to judge what effect, if any, the government’s decision to halt engagement with STREET will have. Some observers consider that it has deprived frontline agencies in south London and perhaps more widely of one of their most effective community partners in the fight against violent Islamist radicalization. Others, particularly those viewing the whole debate over Prevent from a position of opposition to partnership with Islamist and Salafist movements generally, believe funding has been cut from a project that was unfit to receive public money in the first place.

This has raised some concerns at the practitioner level that government agencies will not be able to work productively with some Muslim groups who, like followers of

other forms of religious conservatism, are often deeply critical of aspects of modern liberal society but who nonetheless are intrinsically opposed to the ideology and activities of violent extremists. Conservative Muslims, including some from among the United Kingdom’s now very diverse Salafi landscape, can sometimes make highly effective partners for successfully delivering community counterradicalization programs, as their ideological platform makes them well placed to challenge violent extremist arguments. They also have the credibility among the target audience that other members of Muslim communities sometimes lack. None of those interviewed for this study, STREET included, believed the STREET model was the only solution, acknowledging that individuals and groups from other Muslim communities and those of other ideological orientations had also proven to be effective partners in many circumstances. Nevertheless, all agreed STREET represented a highly effective contribution to countering violent Islamist radicalization.

Consequently, the example of STREET raises important, wider questions for policymakers in UN member states developing their own domestic counterextremism strategies. Should governments fund the counterextremism efforts of more conservative sections of Muslim communities, particularly those demonstrating an Islamist or Salafi identity? The landscape of contemporary Islamism and Salafism is a broad one, at least in the UK; should all be excluded as potential government partners in counterextremism? If parts of these communities are indeed fit for partnership, how should productive engagement occur? What are the risks, if any, for the government, and what degree of risk should be tolerated in engaging with these constituencies? How can programming be designed in a way that ensures that the government can actually tell which programs are effective, so that there is an evidence base that might allow a debate focused on results rather than preconceptions?

Finally, the case of STREET demands consideration of how “extremists” and “moderates” are defined in counterextremism policymaking and what effects this has for developing relationships at the community level. It bears consideration whether the

sometimes inaccurate or misleading categorizations of various communities are a hindrance to forming those community partnerships that are genuinely effective in meeting the challenge of violent extremist radicalization.

## \*Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all those individuals who consented to be interviewed at length for this project, including community representatives, academics, and public servants. Some could not be named due to the nature of their professions and the sensitivity of the issues being discussed.

The author is particularly grateful to Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker and Alyas Karmani of STREET for their time and willingness to share extensive details of their organization’s work; Jazakallah khair for your assistance.

Any inaccuracies or mistakes in this policy brief are the responsibility of the author.

## Selected Bibliography

Channel: A Partnership Approach To Support Individuals Vulnerable To Recruitment By Violent Extremists. Association Of Chief Police Officers Prevent Delivery Unit, 2009.  
<http://www.acpo.police.uk/documents/TAM/Channel.pdf>

Baker, Abdul Haqq. “Prevent, Violent Extremists vs. Non-violent Extremist and Shared Values—The Debate Continues.” 8 June 2011. <http://aboutstreet.com/index.php/street/4138-prevent%2C-violent-extremists-vs.-non-violent-extremist-and-shared-values—the-debate-continues.html>.

Baker, Abdul Haqq. *The Extremists in Our Midst*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Bartlett, Jamie, and Carl Miller. “Should Britain Work With ‘Extremists’ to Prevent Terrorism?” OpenDemocracy.net, 16 March 2011. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jamie-bartlett-carl-miller/should-britain-work-with-extremists-to-prevent-terrorism-where>.

Bartlett, Jamie, and Jonathan Birdwell. “The Edge of Violence.” DEMOS, 2010.  
[http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Edge\\_of\\_Violence\\_-\\_full\\_-\\_web.pdf?1291806916](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Edge_of_Violence_-_full_-_web.pdf?1291806916).

Briggs, Rachel. “Community Engagement for Counterterrorism: Lessons From the United Kingdom.” *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 4 (2010).

Carlile, Alex. “Report to the Home Secretary of Independent Oversight of Prevent Review and Strategy.” May 2011.  
<http://recora.eu/media/downloads/lordcarlilereport.pdf>.

“Better Than Cure—but Difficult.” *Economist*. 9 June 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/18805915>.

Farr, Charles. “Response to ‘Choosing Our Friends Wisely.’” 23 June 2009.  
[http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Dean\\_Godson\\_letter\\_-\\_Choosing\\_our\\_Friends\\_Wisely\\_23-06-09.pdf](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Dean_Godson_letter_-_Choosing_our_Friends_Wisely_23-06-09.pdf)

UK Secretary of State for the Home Department. “*The Prevent Strategy*.” June 2011.  
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/prevent/prevent-strategy/prevent-strategy-review?view=Binary>.

Karmani, Alyas. “Reducing the Influences of Radicalisation for Prisoners: An EU Funded Project in Conjunction With London and West Yorkshire Probation.” 2009. <http://www.acpo.police.uk/documents/TAM/Channel.pdf>.

Maher, Shiraz, and Martyn Frampton, “Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement With Muslims Groups.” Policy Exchange, 2009. [http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Choosing\\_Our\\_Friends\\_Wisely.pdf](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Choosing_Our_Friends_Wisely.pdf).

Soria, Valentina. “The New PREVENT Strategy: Establishing Realistic Expectations.” Royal United Services Institute, June 2011. <http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4DF08BD1BB00F/>.

Vidino, Lorenzo. “The Role of Non-violent Islamists in Europe.” Combating Terrorism Center, 1 November 2010.  
<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-role-of-non-violent-islamists-in-europe>.

*The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.*