

EX POST PAPER

Setting up an exit intervention

Introduction

Exit programmes provide support to individuals wishing to leave a radical movement and/or to abstain from radical thought (¹). The work involved in providing this support is complex and lacks internationally agreed quality standards that are based on research.

Organisations involved in exit work have to address a number of key issues across various areas: organisational structure and objectives, hiring staff and working with formers, engaging with radicalised individuals, media and communication, safety aspects and confidentiality, quality measures and evaluation, and working with returnees. This paper aims to help guide organisations in addressing these issues.

The recommendations and information contained in this paper are based on presentations and discussions held during the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) 'Exit Academy' of 13 and 14 February 2017. This document is intended for organisations planning to set up an exit intervention or that have done so recently. However, more experienced exit organisations and other actors in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) may benefit as well.

Organisational structures and objectives

Organisations involved in exit work must be aware of their objectives, structure and position in society. Each type of exit intervention presents corresponding advantages and disadvantages. There is no one superior type of intervention; workers must determine which type's features best serve the local environment.

Component of exit intervention	Options
Objective What is the main goal of the exit intervention?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disengagement: a change in behaviour by ending all forms of involvement in militant activities. • Deradicalisation: a change in values by ending the espousal of militant views and of justified violence. + A genuine change of mind makes re-engagement less likely. – Deradicalisation is much harder to realise than disengagement (and sometimes, it is impossible). <p><i>Note: (De)radicalisation and (dis)engagement are loosely connected processes, and which will occur first varies.</i></p>
Target group Who is the exit intervention for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists. • Militant Islamists and foreign fighters. • Left-wing extremists. • Members of cults, gangs and other criminal groups. <p><i>Note: Some exit interventions cover more than one type of target group.</i></p>
Type of intervention Is the exit intervention a programme, a project or a standard praxis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme: a ready-made 'package' of know-how, concepts and measures and an organisational structure which can be implemented locally. + Is reproducible. – Is expensive to develop, and is not always best suited to local conditions. • Project: stand-alone initiatives established to solve a specific problem. May be inspired by ideas, methods and aspects of other projects, and are put together as organisations see fit. + Is tailor-made for the local/current state of violent extremism. – Is time-limited and dependent on external funding. • Standard praxis: specific methods and strategies are included in the regular tool-box of an agency, profession or non-governmental organisation (NGO). + Requires less additional funding, and is good for maintaining flexibility. – Demands a lot from the professional: training and additional responsibilities .
Implementing organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public agency: government-run intervention. May be managed by the secret service, police or municipality. + Has access to resources and ability to make decisions to change practice (by funding, legislation etc.). – Possibly issues with credibility and trust in the eyes of the target group. • Non-governmental organisations + Has high social capital and access to the target group. – Has lack of resources, less certainty of longevity and less risk assessment. • Collaboration between public agencies and NGOs: both advantages and disadvantages can be amplified with collaboration.
Where is the organisation placed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In society + Real-life situations offer possibilities to work on new networks. – There are fewer incentives to motivate clients to participate. • In prison and probation (²) + There are more measures to motivate the client to participate; the environment is easier to control. – Client might participate for the wrong reasons (like reduction of their sentence).
Who performs the roles of mentor/coach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former extremists + Offer credibility, may serve as role models, have personal experience and knowledge. – There is a risk of relapse, some are not suited to role of mentor, may project their own experience onto the client, or may lack distance. • Professionals + Are trained, educated and experienced in the profession. – Lack personal experience and distance from the biography of the target group. <p><i>Note: The role of formers will be discussed more extensively on</i></p>

Hiring staff

The job title 'exit worker' is not protected and can therefore be used by anyone. Although some organisations offer training in this type of work, it is not possible to obtain a degree as an exit worker. So which attributes and skills make for a suitable exit worker?

The perfect exit worker

During the RAN Exit Academy (13 and 14 February 2017, Berlin) both experienced and starting exit workers rated different attributes and skills, to create the 'perfect' exit worker, with the maximum score being 100 %, and the lowest being 0 %. Of course, it is impossible to come up with general prerequisites for exit workers, given the diverse conditions in which they work. In this sense, this overview is not the ultimate checklist for recruitment that fits all exit programmes. Rather, it presents aspects and characteristics that might be relevant when assessing the suitability of an exit worker.

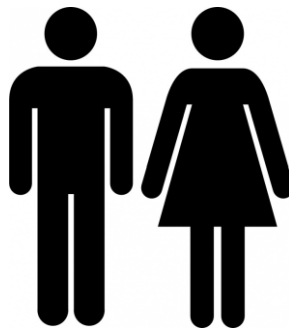
Personal characteristics

Nice to have

- Is a former (42 %).
- Has same background (cultural/ethnic/religious) as the target group (42 %).

Not relevant

- Has same gender as the client (28%).



Attitude

Must have

- Believes that people can change (97 %).
- Listens and observes well, notices details (94 %).
- Behaves credibly (88 %).
- Is non-judgemental (85 %).
- Is patient (82 %).
- Is curious (79 %).

Knowledge and experience

Must have

- Understands radicalisation processes (100 %).
- Knows how a radicalised environment functions (90 %).
- Understands processes of recruitment/grooming (90 %).

Nice to have

- Is an expert on the radical ideology (60 %).
- Is certified as a counsellor (48 %).
- Has theological expertise (43%).

Skills

Must have

- Able to motivate/stimulate people to change (97 %)
- Is able to encourage critical thinking (97 %)
- Has good conversation techniques (92 %)
- Makes people responsible for their own process/success (83 %)
- Knows how to involve the social network and family of the participant (78 %)

Nice to have

- Is able to use other professional networks for help (48 %).

Exit work cases are all different, and they call for a tailor-made approach. Exit interventions therefore benefit most from staff diversity, both in background and experience. Although counsellor certification was not deemed a 'must-have' for the perfect exit worker, participants did underline that extensive training for all staff members is critical.

Formers as staff members

Formers receive a great deal of attention in exit work. They are often viewed as a solution by the general public and politicians, who consider that 'they know what they are talking about'. In fact, practice reveals that while formers contribute to good exit work, there are risks as well as potential disadvantages involved. Therefore, an organisation should be well aware of the considerations, as explained below.

What is the added value of working with formers?

- Formers can increase the credibility and trustworthiness of an exit intervention.
- Formers can play an exemplary role for both clients and public. They show that change is possible.
- It can be a therapeutic experience for clients to speak with a former. Clients can relate with others who experienced similar processes and dynamics.

What are the risks and potential disadvantages?

- Loyalties and the risk of relapse of formers must be assessed. Despite there not being many such cases, nothing is more damaging than to hire extremists presenting themselves as formers.
- Being a former in itself is not enough. Exit work is a difficult profession, and not all formers possess the required skills, attitude and experience.
- There is a risk of formers projecting their own experience onto that of a client.

In which part of the exit process does experience in a radicalised environment prove valuable?

- Formers can be directly involved in mentoring and counselling.
- Formers can play a role in communication: their story is far more interesting than a professional explain the project. However, formers should never be pushed to do this and should be closely guided.
- Formers can play an advisory role in the organisation, and provide advice and guidance to professionals.

When are formers fit to contribute to an exit programme? How should they be prepared for their new role?

- It is extremely important that sufficient time has passed following the former's own exit process, before they play an active role in exit work. Formers must first adjust to life after extremism, resocialise, and leave behind the ego and grandiosity that are part of the emotional benefit of being a member of an extremist group.
- Extensive training will reveal whether a former is actually suitable for work in an exit project.

Engaging with radicalised individuals

The core of exit work is the direct engagement between the mentor/counsellor and the radicalised individual. This bilateral relationship means the exit worker must deal with pressure and the responsibility. What should exit workers be aware of?

What makes you credible to a radicalised person?

- It is perfectly possible to be credible as a non-former: be interested, curious and genuine. Do not act as if you know what the other has experienced.
- Be transparent about your role, the information you share and your relations with other actors and authorities.
- Building mutual trust and credibility is a slow-moving process. Invest in the relationship.

What to discuss and what not to discuss with your client

- Ask questions; do not focus on advice.
- Help the client understand processes and constructions. Create doubt and make them understand the flaws in their construction, without judging them.
- Discuss the client's frustration with them. The expression of frustration is very wrong, but the frustration itself may be very real.
- It is often necessary to talk about ideology, but this should never turn into a debate on morals and values. Even if you are not an expert on ideology, you can always ask questions like 'Why does this ideology help you?'.

How to create an environment/mindset in which change is an option

- There is a difference between someone needing help and someone being ready for help. You cannot force a deradicalisation intervention on someone who is not open to it.
- The radical extremist ideology and lifestyle are directly intertwined with the identity of the radicalised individual. There is no point deconstructing somebody's identity before an alternative option is in place.
- Build a new life outside the extremist group: a social network, work and housing. Pull the client out of the isolated environment.

Where should an exit worker draw the line when it comes to their support?

- Any signals of criminal and/or violent extremist acts should be communicated directly to the police and secret services. Be transparent about this from the beginning.
- If you are either too emotionally involved or at a protracted stand-still.

Guidelines on media/communication

In the field of radicalisation and exit work, the media is a player which cannot be ignored. Regrettably, media attention is often highest when an incident occurs. It is important that you are well prepared in such an event. But an organisation involved in exit work may also have reasons to proactively seek media attention.

What should media appearances entail?

- Have a key message prepared containing the mission statement, added value and name of your project.
- Be objective.
- When things are going well, do not get carried away by your success. Under-promise and over-deliver.
- Always consider the objective and audience of a specific media appearance.
- Be aware of client and staff safety, credibility and confidentiality.

An incident occurred. How do you respond?

- Train staff in crisis communication and have a representative assigned for crises.
- Be honest: a 100 % success rate is not realistic in exit work. The alternative however is doing nothing.
- Underline that any movements related to violent extremism and other criminal acts will be reported directly to the police and secret services.
- Repeat the message of added value. Share success stories showing that radicals can change.
- Make sure that all the facts are presented correctly.
- Check that your story matches those of your colleagues and the other agencies involved.

Why would you proactively seek media attention?

- To raise awareness on the topic. Share success stories, and show that change is possible. This might attract new clients and/or funds.
- Sometimes, there is a need to promote a client as a former; otherwise, people may still view them as a radical.
- To build a good relationship with the press.

Confidentiality

Exit work is not an isolated activity. Social services, the police, media, local authorities, the secret service and family members are only some of the actors that play a role during an exit intervention. Sharing information and collaborating with these actors is an important part of exit work. However, organisations in exit work must be aware that they are bound by the laws of privacy and confidentiality in their country. In order to remain credible to your client, it is also vital that you be completely transparent about the information you share. Actors have different agendas and there is a risk of over-sharing information.

Security measures

This field of work is directly linked to groups and individuals who are accustomed to violence and crime. The risk of violence is very real and must be taken seriously. The threat level will differ per case and organisation. The overview in Figure 2 describes safety measures which should be implemented if the situation demands it.



The office

- Do not communicate the address of your office online or offline (signage).
- Keep sensitive documents and files safely secured in your office.
- Employ security.

Communication

- Regulate information. Do not share sensitive information over insecure mediums.
- Do not use private phones for work.
- Control information: Who knows what?

Protecting staff

- Conceal staff members' home addresses.
- Keep colleagues informed about each other's appointments and whereabouts.

High-risk cases

- Collaborate with security agencies.
- Create disinformation to mislead former groups.
- Form emergency plans and contact structures.

Case management

- **Analyse the threats:** groups, person(s), roles, dangerous knowledge, history.
- **Shield:** prepare an information plan and measures for the exit procedure.

Protecting the client

- Tell the client to make a note of all threats.
- Provide them with a logbook.
- Relocate them to a new environment.
- Create a safe environment where the client can share their story.

Quality standards and evaluation

Evaluation and quality standards are almost non-existent in the field of exit work. This is due partly to how new the field is, but mostly to the nature of the work, in which studies with control groups are ethically impossible to implement. Nonetheless, organisations can implement measures to improve their quality and measure success, as shown below.

Measures to set quality standards and evaluation

- Determine your target group, processes and objectives.
- Be transparent: share your results, both the numbers and the qualitative reports.
- Possible objectives may be:
 - number of clients that finished a programme (output);
 - change in behaviour and attitude (qualitative outcome);
 - number of people that do not re-enter the old extremist group or commit crime (statistical outcome, difficult to measure).
- External factors cannot be excluded in evaluation of exit work. Therefore, evaluation will always be flawed.
- Internal evaluation helps to develop standard protocol and a uniform approach.

Returnees

There is serious and growing concern over how to deal with the increase in returning foreign terrorist fighters. Although most will be imprisoned, it is hard to prove crimes committed in Syria and Iraq. It is therefore likely that returnees will return to society at some point, and then they will have to resocialise ⁽³⁾. Exit interventions will play a crucial role in doing so, and all additional considerations and measures this type of clients may or may not require must be taken into account ⁽⁴⁾.

To what extent are returnees a homogeneous group?

- Returnees differ widely:
 - some are disillusioned, some are disengaged but still radicalised, and some return with plans for extremist violence and terrorist acts;
 - their roles and experiences in Syria and Iraq will differ greatly;
 - returnees are men, women and children ⁽⁵⁾;
 - not everyone left to fight for Daesh; some went to provide humanitarian aid or to fight Assad in militant groups.

What are the differences between those who travelled as Foreign Terrorist Fighters and other radical extremists?

- Radical extremists that did not travel to Syria or Iraq did not have a chance to become disillusioned by the harsh reality of the 'caliphate'.
- Most returnees will have been exposed to violence and traumatic events.
- Returnees under Daesh will have received military and ideological training.

To what extent does a 'regular' exit programme apply for returnees?

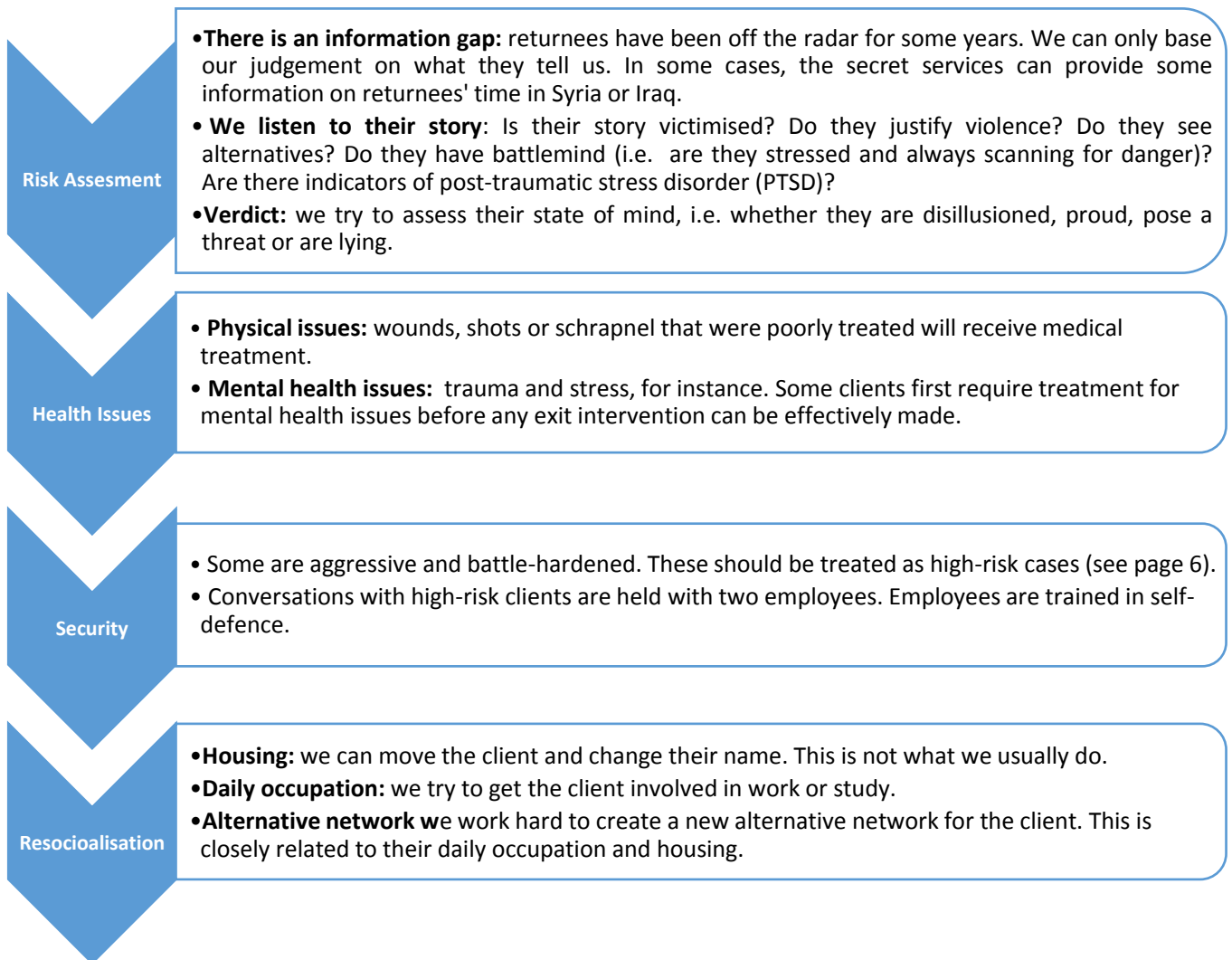
- Each exit intervention should be tailored to its case. This applies for returnees and extremists that did not travel abroad.

What should be done in addition to the 'regular' supply?

- Supporting the families of foreign fighters will deliver benefits once the fighters return. If these families trust the exit organisation, they can become important partners and motivate the returnee to cooperate with the programme.
- Returnees might have experienced violence and/or received military training. Risk assessment is called for, to ascertain whether additional safety measures are needed (see page 6).
- Returnees from Daesh have received ideological training. Although non-religious exit workers are perfectly capable of conversing on ideology, support from a theological expert or imam might be helpful in these cases.
- Safeguarding the environment. Daesh can threaten returnees and their social environment: in one case, a pregnant girl that returned from Daesh territory was threatened by Daesh because they claimed the baby belonged to the so-called Caliphate.

Aarhus exit intervention for dealing with returnees

The exit intervention in Aarhus, Denmark is integrated into the police department. As mentioned earlier on page 2 of this paper, this structure presents both advantages as disadvantages. To be directly affiliated with the state and law enforcement can decrease credibility and generate mistrust with potential clients. However, the additional resources and measures that the exit intervention can implement are very useful, especially for dealing with returnees. The four-step procedure of the Aarhus exit programme, which was adjusted to accommodate returnee clients, is shown below.



References and additional reading

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⁽²⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2016). RAN P&P Ex post paper: 'Exit programmes and interventions in prison and probation'. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-p-and-p/docs/ex_post_paper_ran_p_and_p_14-15_06_2016_en.pdf

⁽³⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2016). RAN issue paper 'Foreign fighter returnees & the reintegration challenge'. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_foreign_fighter_returnees_reintegration_challenge_112016_en.pdf

⁽⁴⁾ International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. (2015). ICCT Policy Brief: 'Rehabilitation for Foreign Fighters? Relevance, Challenges and Opportunities for the Criminal Justice Sector'. Retrieved from <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ICCT-Entenmann-Heide-Weggemans-Dorsey-Rehabilitation-for-Foreign-Fighters-December2015.pdf>

⁽⁵⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2016). RAN, RAN issue paper: 'Child returnees from conflict zones'. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_child_returnees_from_conflict_zones_112016_en.pdf