

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN event – Direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees
24 November 2020, Online

Conducting direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees: a guideline

Summary

Discussions on facilitating direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees¹ are aimed primarily at the successful disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration (DRR) of terrorist detainees. Often, a secondary aim of such interactions is to prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism among the general prison population. A previous RAN Victims of Terrorism (VoT) Working Group meeting, held on 29 September 2020, explored the procedural aspects of such direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees². The follow-up meeting, held on 24 November 2020, brought together victims, trainers, subject matter experts and practitioners, to formulate guidelines on how to conduct the dialogues. The practical issues and related processes that were discussed covered three broad categories: (1) how to initiate and sustain interactions, (2) who is best placed to participate in the interactions, and (3) the subject matter of the interactions. These recommendations are discussed further below.

The scope of this guideline is limited to the DRR of terrorist detainees. A critical underlying assumption regarding any victims involved in the direct interactions is that they have moved past their personal traumas. In addition, any transformation of terrorist detainees should be seen as aspirational, rather than expected. Finally, participants stressed that direct interactions between victims and terrorist detainees should never be considered a silver bullet. Instead, these dialogues should always form part of a larger strategic approach.

Introduction

Terrorists dehumanise their victims; the people impacted as a result are viewed as mere collateral damage. Victims of terrorism become involuntary conduits for the political message that terrorists seek to convey. Efforts to rehumanise victims of terrorism in the eyes of terrorists have therefore been widely regarded as an important element in strategic work aimed at preventing radicalisation towards violence³. Based on the few leading experiences

¹ For the purpose of these guidelines, only interactions with some level of reciprocity in terms of sharing are included. One-way presentations to target audiences are interactions of a different nature, and therefore need a separate set of guidelines.

² Knoope, P. (2020): *Organising direct interactions between Victims of Terrorism and Terrorist Detainees: a Guideline*.

³ See: Radicalisation Awareness Network (2016): [Handbook: Voices of victims of terrorism](#) EU RAN; RAN (2020): [How to involve victims of terrorism in a prevention campaign, conclusions paper](#), EU RAN; Boon & Osman (2020): [From Victims of Terrorism to messengers for peace: A strategic approach](#).

from different parts of the world, the process has produced encouraging results for the DRR of terrorist detainees, particularly the approach of facilitating direct interactions between victims and detainees.

It is important to note that each individual's path and motivations are complex and unique. With this caveat, this paper presents guidelines for practitioners, prison officials, trainers and victims alike, based on what has worked before – and what hasn't. When organising direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees, it is essential to account for different contexts, personalities and backgrounds, and adjust one's planning and process accordingly. Most importantly, the well-being and safety of the victims involved should always be prioritised.

Guidelines

Three broad sets of guidelines were identified during the meeting:

1. How to interact;
2. Who interacts;
3. What to discuss.

Each of these questions is further discussed below.

1. How to interact

Decide how to conduct the interactions

Direct interactions can take the form of discussion groups with multiple victims and/or multiple detainees present at the same time, or of one-on-one dialogues facilitated by a suitable moderator. Benefits of the larger settings include greater diversity among the victims, which may prove useful in contexts where the victims and detainees are of different sociocultural backgrounds; also, victims can receive support offered by other peers present during the process, should they need it. However, victims may find the presence of more than one detainee intimidating.

On the other hand, larger groups may present less opportunity for personal sharing amongst participants, particularly on the part of the detainees. One-on-one dialogue allows for far more in-depth and personal interaction, increasing the chances for empathetic connection. The relative privacy can also combat possible defensiveness on the detainees' part in reaction to a victim's story. Both approaches should be carefully evaluated before proceeding, depending on the context and nature of the effort.

Strive for an equal exchange of perspectives

Any direct interaction with detainees is, by definition, asymmetrical in nature, since the person on one side of the dialogue is incarcerated. Therefore, a serious endeavour needs to be made by all involved to allow for an equal exchange of perspectives, through the expression of life stories, experiences, doubts and motives. It is important not to resort to language or attitudes that might come across as lecturing the detainee. Participants must try to view each other first and foremost as human beings, and refrain from judgmental tone and language. For example, if the detainee voices opinions considered "conspiracy theories" by other participants, they should not be dismissed as such, but rather accepted as the expression of differing views among equals.

To listen is to send a message

An essential element of dialogue between equals is that both sides listen to each other. The exercise not only aims at rehumanising the victims, but also allows detainees the chance to rehumanise themselves, and not feel immediately judged. It is important that participating victims are aware of this aim and are willing to listen to the expression of life stories and choices that have been detrimental to them, directly or indirectly. These stories have shaped the identities of the detainees; listening to them patiently without resorting to blame or judgement will send detainees the message that they are being viewed as human beings.

Ensure that victims and detainees understand that there are no expectations

Detainees might question victims' motives for participation, possibly feeling that they will be expected to change their views or apologise. Conversely, when detainees express regret for their past actions, victims might feel they are expected to offer a forgiveness of sorts. Perceived expectations of this kind would put pressure on the participants and affect the discussion, unbalancing the equal nature of the interaction needed to achieve mutual rehumanisation. It should be made clear before the dialogue starts, that there are no expectations, on either side, of changed views, apologies or forgiveness – just an equal exchange of views.

Focus on quality, not quantity

A victim may be willing and ready to participate in direct interactions with terrorist detainees, but bear in mind that every recounting of the deeply personal and oftentimes painful stories will be emotionally taxing. The detainees will also need time to reflect on their experience of meeting with victims. Energy on the part of the facilitators and prison staff is finite too. Therefore, it is worth focusing on fewer, well-prepared and well-conducted meetings, rather than organising a large number of encounters.

2. Who interacts

Building empathy

It is hoped that through their personal stories, victims will be rehumanised in the eyes of the detainees, and detainees will develop empathy for the victims. Ideally, of course, common humanity is universal, but it may be that detainees are quicker to empathise with victims from similar sociocultural, political and/or ethnic backgrounds.

Establishing independence

Detainees might view the dialogue and its stakeholders as a form of propaganda by the government bodies they disagree with or oppose. It is therefore vital that detainees know that the victims are participating through their own agency, and not on behalf of any government or body. Detainees should be informed of this before any dialogue and should also be reminded during the dialogue. It is equally important that detainees participate voluntarily, and not as a condition of the criminal justice process (as might be the case in their mandated interactions with social workers and/or probation officers, for instance).

Initiative lies with victims

Apart from establishing the independence of the dialogue, it should be made clear that the initiative for the interaction lies with the victim rather than the authorities or facilitators. One way to reinforce this is to have the victim start the conversation, or at least share their story first after the facilitator introduces the participants. This will also allow the victim's personal, non-confrontational and non-judgmental attitude and content to set the tone for the interaction, increasing the likelihood that the detainee will react in kind.

Role of prison staff

Importantly, before any direct interactions take place, prison staff must brief victims and facilitators on the background and current level of the "radicalisation" of the detainees. If prison staff sit in on interactions, their role must be limited to brief introductions, if possible, keeping in mind the significance of the victims' perceived independence. It is also vital to select staff who are most trusted by the participating detainees, as far as is possible under the circumstances. If the interactions form part of a larger approach overall, prison staff can be trained and mobilised to also conduct and support impact evaluation.

Role of victims

The victims' main task is to share their experiences; as mentioned before, they should not expect anything more from the conversation. It's essential that victims keep to their personal stories and do not feel pressured into entering political or ideological debates, even if provoked by wildly differing views. If such a risk arises, it is the job of trained facilitators to promptly intercept it and either address the issue or deflect it. Victims should not be

expected to act as experts on (countering) ideological justifications for violence. Given the personal nature of the trauma caused by terrorist violence, understandable negative reactions to justifications for that violence could have an adverse effect on the discussion.

Role of facilitators

The role of trained facilitators is to provide a space that allows for real dialogue between victims and detainees. Facilitators should only step in when participants misinterpret or misunderstand each other, or when emotions flare up. In addition, when the talk turns to political and/or ideological justifications for violence, the facilitator should step in and steer the conversation back to the victim's experiences, to prevent the discussion swerving onto broader ideological topics. All participants should trust in the facilitator's credibility; ideally, one facilitator should perform this role for all the participants in a given dialogue, to prevent any conflict between facilitators during the direct interactions. Ideal facilitator candidates are those who have credible (educational/ideological) standing with the detainees and who can also be involved in pre-dialogue trust-building efforts with victims.

3. What to discuss

Sharing personal stories

When sharing their stories, victims are advised not to focus exclusively on the pain and trauma they experienced, but also on how they were able to move past it. Victims are advised to keep to the facts of the story (*what happened*), the factual and emotional impact (*what this meant to me*), the motives and underlying belief structures and considerations that helped them to overcome the impact (*why this happened to me*), and the insecurities and doubts they had along the way (*what my vulnerabilities are*).

Expressing vulnerabilities, including anger and frustration

By moving beyond the facts of what happened and revealing their vulnerability, victims show how they have wrestled with very human reactions to injustice. Some may have initially wanted to react destructively, through violence, vengeance or suicide, for instance. Yet they were ultimately able to choose more positive paths. Showing such emotions will replace mere facts with a story and emotions, and could inspire detainees to make an endeavour to follow similarly (more) positive paths.

Staying focused on the subject, and impact, of violence

The goal is to move detainees to reflect on (their own) legitimisation of violence, by showcasing the destructive impact of terrorist attacks on personal lives. Discussions around politics, ideology or religion, especially when unrelated to the issue of violence, will distract from this primary aim. When attempts are made to justify violence, it should be the facilitator who brings in counterarguments, based on the same ideology that inspired the justifications. It is imperative, however, to return the focus back to the victims' stories as soon as possible.

Seeking common ground

While direct interactions are in no way expected to result in any significant agreement between victims and detainees, seeking common ground will be helpful in kindling empathy, a critical starting point for rehumanisation. If it is not possible to elicit empathy through commonalities in background, common ground can be sought in similarities in life stories and/or experiences.

Relevant practices

Healing Social Wounds (Italy)

From 2008 to 2015 a dialogue took place between convicted Italian terrorists from the 1970s and 1980s and direct or indirect victims. *The Book of the Encounter: Victims and Former Armed Fighters Face Each Other*, published in October 2015, narrates the path the participants walked together and the processes they underwent.

Restorative encounters between former ETA members and victims (Spain)

Between 2011 and 2012, 14 restorative encounters were held with prisoners who had declared their rejection of armed violence. These prisoners had been associated with the Basque separatist terrorist organisation ETA. The restorative encounters were led and coordinated by lawyer and mediator Esther Pascual Rodríguez.

Building bridges for peace / survivors against terror (United Kingdom)

In 1984, Jo Berry lost her father in a terrorist attack. Ever since, she has been working to promote peace and understand the roots of terrorism. She met the man responsible in 2000, and they have shared platforms more than 300 times since.

French Association of Terrorism Victims (France)

The French Association for Victims of Terrorism (AFVT) was created in 2009 by Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc, who lost his father in a terrorist attack in 1989. Since 2015, the AFVT has organised prison workshops and a school intervention programme, where victims tell their stories to inspire the understanding that hatred is not a solution.

Victims' voices initiative (Indonesia)

Max Boon lost both his legs in the 2009 in the JW Marriott terrorist bomb attack in Jakarta. As co-founder of the Victims' Voices initiative, Max has been working ever since to promote peace and delegitimise justifications for terrorist violence, through direct engagements with local victims and former perpetrators of terrorism in Indonesia.

Further reading

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