



CONCLUSIONS PAPER

**FROM PRISON TO SOCIETY: ENHANCING
CONTINUITY BETWEEN DETENTION AND
POST-RELEASE PROGRAMMING IN CASES
OF TERRORIST AND VIOLENT EXTREMIST
OFFENDERS**

Thematic Research Meeting

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KEY OUTCOMES

This Thematic Research Meeting (TRM), entitled *From Prison to Society: Enhancing Continuity between Detention and Post-Release Programming in Cases of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Offenders*, took place on the 14th and 15th of September 2021. It brought together 18 leading researchers from Australia, Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to discuss their insights about interventions with radicalised offenders, and to share experiences and best practices for rehabilitation and post-release programming. A core emphasis was placed on issues of continuity in the delivery of these interventions, in particular as offenders transition from prisons to probation, and then on to the community. Key recommendations are provided below, based on the assessments of the experts presented in this paper.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DISCUSSION

The workshop revealed notable differences between countries:

- A key underpinning theme throughout the discussions was **the extent to which contexts vary between countries**, and the degree to which this influenced provisions. For instance, this related to the number of radicalised offenders in each country, historical events influencing public perceptions regarding rehabilitation and reintegration interventions (and how these should be balanced against more immediate public protection needs), and the resources available for services and interventions. Legacy can also play a prominent role, for instance with probation not being offered to these offenders in Northern Ireland following threats to probation officers over recent years.
- Another key contextual difference reflects policy decisions regarding the extent to which these offenders are **concentrated into a limited number of prison facilities, or dispersed among the general inmate population**. For instance, while the latter approach is largely adopted by authorities in England and Wales, they also maintain one active ‘Separation Centre’ for those deemed most likely to recruit others and pose the highest risk to society. Of course, there is no ‘correct’ approach, and policymakers must weigh up a series of costs and benefits associated with each option.¹
- A third notable difference relates to **the extent to which countries emphasise rehabilitation and reintegration against more immediate public protection requirements**. Several presenters argued that post-release conditions (including curbs on movements, limitations on internet usage, and so on) are often restrictive to the extent that they privilege the latter over the former. However, while in the case of Australia it was reported that these conditions remain strict, in England and Wales there

¹ For more on this issue, see for instance Andrew Silke & Tinka Veldhuis (2017), ‘Countering Violent Extremism in Prisons: A Review of Key Recent Research and Critical Research Gaps’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, No. 5, pp. 4-5; and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2016), *Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons*, UNODC, New York, pp. 46-54.

is seemingly a gradual shift towards the former through a greater emphasis on desistance models, as opposed to risk management approaches.

- It is also possible to identify a number of **notable differences between countries in terms of the support offered to these offenders**. For instance, while ideological (or religious/spiritual) support represents a core element in many countries, this is not the case in Ireland where probation officers tend to view this violence more from a social perspective. Notable differences can also be observed in relation to the extent to which countries focus on psychological interventions, psychosocial support, and mentoring, and the forms that these take.²

Of course, there are also a number of clear commonalities between countries:

- One obvious commonality related to **the challenge of determining the extent to which these interventions have achieved success**. Certain participants were broadly supportive of measuring success through recidivism rates, arguing that this offers a simple measure that is easily understood by politicians and the public. Others highlighted limitations with this metric, including that in many cases the available figures do not distinguish between returns to ideologically justified violence from a subsequent involvement in lesser crimes, and the extent to which a return terrorism falls on a spectrum (i.e., ranging from ‘mere’ propaganda for particular organisations to direct involvement in attacks). With such issues in mind, there is a strong argument for such interventions to be evaluated through reference to additional metrics, potentially relating to the concepts of reintegration and secondary and tertiary desistance.³
- Another recurring theme was **the need to communicate programme successes to the public**, with one participant highlighting academic research showing that this is associated with increased public support for such interventions. To place these discussions in context, it was also observed that high-profile cases in which programme beneficiaries subsequently returned to ideologically justified violence (for instance, including Usman Khan in London and Kujtim Fejzulai in Vienna) tend to provoke calls from individuals in many sectors to end these interventions. Of course, **it is simply not realistic for such programmes (just like any other programme for non-extremist offenders) to achieve 100 percent success (however measured), a point that many will continue to find unpalatable**.
- Several participants also highlighted the **inadequacies of these interventions as they relate to female offenders in particular**,⁴ with this imbalance partly driven by there being fewer female radicalised offenders. It was argued that few countries have adequately considered the additional concerns that often relate to the cohort of female offenders generally, or how to adequately address parental rights. Of course, this issue

² For more on this issue, see for instance James Khalil et al (2021), ‘Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Extremist Offenders in Europe: Mapping Programmes and Reviewing Evidence of their Success (and Failure)’, *RAN Policy Support Consolidated Overview*.

³ This issue is also discussed in greater detail in James Khalil et al (2021), ‘Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Extremist Offenders in Europe,’ & Sarah Marsden, ‘[Conceptualising ‘Success’ with those Convicted of Terrorism Offences](#),’ *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, Vol. 7, Iss. 2, 2015.

For instance, particular measures may include the proportion of offenders earning an income that is sufficient to meet their needs, or who no longer associate with ‘radical’ networks.

⁴ For more on this issue, see for instance Jessica White (2021), ‘Policy Lessons for Exit Programming: Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Female Extremist Offenders and Beyond’, *RAN Policy Support Conclusions Paper*.

is of substantial relevance in the present context given the ongoing discussions about women and children returning from facilities in Iraq and Syria.

On the interventions themselves:

- A prominent theme throughout much of the event was **the perceived need for interventions to focus to a greater extent on social interventions and initiatives with return communities**. For instance, drawing on extensive research in Sweden and Denmark, one participant argued in favour of greater support to help radicalised offenders develop social competences as an essential part of their social reintegration process. Several contributors argued that an emphasis is often placed on interventions that focus directly on the beneficiaries themselves (psychological support, housing assistance, and so on), at the expense of efforts that more broadly aim to connect or reconnect these offenders to society, and the need to adequately prepare these communities.

Moving on to the subject of continuity at the heart of this workshop:

- It is worth clarifying that **interventions should evolve as the risks and needs of radicalised offenders develop during their journey from prison to the community**. Those tasked with designing these interventions must consider the most appropriate sequencing of different forms of support, including psychological support, religious or spiritual interventions, mentorships, employment support, and so on. More specifically, one participant highlighted the extent to which introducing support providers with diverse backgrounds (women, POCs, etc.) may have adverse effects at some points.
- Certain participants highlighted **the turnover of personnel as being a major obstacle to the continuity of service delivery**. This includes in the Netherlands, where one participant reported that some new team members had no prior knowledge or experience of working with radicalised offenders. Of course, an additional concern is that incoming team members have to build entirely new relationships with the radicalised offenders. This is particularly problematic given the extent to which rapport is widely considered to be a key determinant of the extent to which the providers can support these offenders to adapt their attitudes and behaviours.
- Another key continuity issue observed by several participants related to **inadequate information sharing between agencies** (often due to different mandates and interests of each agency), including both state and nonstate bodies. In relation to intelligence matters, this was highlighted as a key failure prior to Kujtim Fejzulaj's attack in Vienna. Regarding rehabilitation and reintegration, it was observed that inadequate information sharing can result in the suboptimal delivery of support packages for particular individuals. However, one participant also **cautioned against agencies sharing certain forms of information without the consent of the offenders, as this can result in mistrust**. This is particularly the case with nonstate agencies that may be reliant on the perception that they are adequately removed from state bodies.
- Returning to the subject of post-release conditions (as discussed earlier), several participants also highlighted the extent to which these restrictions can undermine continuity. For instance, these can include curbs on movements (both geographically and in terms of the timing of these), limitations on Internet usage, and so on. In particular, participants highlighted the extent to which **these conditions can provide obstacles to finding work, strengthening family ties, and establishing prosocial networks**.
- Yet another continuity issue relates to **the issue of dislocation, where offenders are returned to communities that were distant from their prison**. This often means that

they are unable to continue with existing service providers, and it can also effectively end the benefits gained through any other prosocial relationships developed earlier in the process.

- Other continuity issues were discussed in less depth, with these including political reactions (or overreactions) to **incidents such as terrorist attacks, which can result in major changes in the management of these offenders, and support being withdrawn.** Another related to cases where offenders are returned to prison (seemingly disproportionately) because of their behaviours in the community, and the extent to which this can undermine progress in other areas of their lives. A third related to cases in which **offenders were prepared for contexts that effectively did not exist post-release** (e.g., in relation to employment opportunities), with this generally indicating poor decisions at the planning stage. A final example is that of ‘over-intervention’, which can manifest in terms of those responsible for the delivery of services in the community repeating what has already been provided in prison.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Intensify efforts to share lessons learned and best practices.** It is not always advisable or even possible for EU Member State to simply replicate the approaches adopted elsewhere, given the extent to which their contexts vary. Nevertheless, these states should intensify their efforts to share lessons learned (including failures) and best practices from other countries.
2. **Reconsider the balance between rehabilitation and public safety aims:** While there will always be certain tensions between these objectives, there is a strong argument that post-release conditions (e.g., curbs on movements, limitations on Internet usage, etc.) should be relaxed in certain contexts to reduce the extent to which they may undermine rehabilitation aims.
3. **Strengthen policy and practice relating to interventions for female offenders:** Far more attention is needed on how these interventions should be adapted specifically for female offenders, considering their particular requirements. This issue is of clear relevance in the present context given the ongoing discussions about women and their children returning from facilities in Iraq and Syria.
4. **Enhance efforts to connect offenders to communities:** Several contributors argued that an emphasis is often placed on interventions that focus directly on the beneficiaries themselves (psychological support, housing assistance, and so on), at the expense of efforts that more broadly aim to connect these offenders to society, and the need to adequately prepare these communities. Efforts should be made to address such imbalance where they apply.
5. **Enhance the adequacy and appropriateness of information flows:** Inadequate information sharing between agencies (including both state and nonstate bodies) can result in the suboptimal delivery of support packages for particular offenders, and efforts should be made to address such problems. Where possible, this should be achieved with the offenders’ consent, to avoid potential issues with mistrust.
6. **Diversify the indicators of ‘success’ beyond recidivism:** Monitoring and evaluation best practice dictates that multiple indicators should be considered to determine programme success or failure. Given the widely acknowledged issues associated with recidivism rates, policymakers should consider also focussing their attention

on measures relating more directly to the concepts of reintegration and secondary and tertiary desistance.

7. **Communicate intervention successes to the public:** To place this recommendation in context, it is worth observing that high-profile cases in which programme beneficiaries returned to ideologically justified violence (for instance, including Usman Khan in London and Kujtim Fejzulai in Vienna) tend to provoke calls from individuals in many sectors to end these interventions. However, academic research has shown that awareness of intervention successes is associated with increased public support for these initiatives.

FOLLOW-UP

The findings of this thematic research meeting will contribute to upcoming RAN meetings, including the Cross-Cutting Event on the Prison-Exit Continuum (6 Oct). Participating researchers showed interest in further engagement and highlighted the importance of avoiding siloed knowledge bases or dislocation between research, policy, and practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr James Khalil is an independent preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), deradicalisation and disengagement specialist. Over recent years he has provided research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) expertise to programmes funded by the EU, UK, US, UN, and others in locations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria. He also recently completed research with former members of Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, focusing on their trajectories into and out of violence, and their subsequent rehabilitation and community reintegration.

Dr Jessica White is a Senior Research Fellow in the Terrorism and Conflict group at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Her expertise encompasses countering terrorism and violent extremism policy and programming, as well as gender mainstreaming strategies. She has over a decade's worth of experience as a researcher and security practitioner. Jessica leads research projects focused on far-right extremism, the nexus of extremism and online gaming, terrorism in the media and gender in security.

Martine Zeuthen is a senior researcher specializing in extremism and radicalisation, PCVE, program management and research methodology, who advises on PCVE and disengagement programs in the Horn of Africa and MENA regions. Her research includes studies in the Kenyan prison system as well as literature reviews of the global literature in relation to rehabilitation in prisons and rehabilitation facilities. She is a Danish anthropologist, and is studying for a doctorate in Crime and Security Studies at University College London.

FURTHER READING

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC:

- Basra, Rajan, & Peter Neumann (2020), '[Prisons and Terrorism: Extremist Offender Management in 10 European Countries](#),' *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)*.
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