Navigating Pathways Toward Deradicalization and Rehabilitation: Lessons from Denmark and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Historically, efforts to address violent extremism have focused on using military and other security resources to deter and coerce violent extremists. Increasingly, such efforts are viewed as insufficient, leading to the expansion of counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs. This, in turn, is generating new debates about how to best use limited resources for programs and the importance of targeting ideology as opposed to behavior. This paper aims to evaluate the barriers countries face throughout the deradicalization process and provides recommendations for developing and improving deradicalization programs. It does so by fostering a greater understanding of processes related to violent extremism, drawing on two international case studies: Denmark and Saudi Arabia. De-emphasizing efforts to radically change individuals' ideology and developing holistic support to reintegrate them with local communities were notably successful approaches, albeit resource intense. However, greater cooperation between states to bridge economic and structural barriers to deradicalization initiatives, particularly through greater transparency of existing programs, is still needed.

Introduction

The bulk of existing scholarship in the field of violent extremism pertain to how individuals become involved in terrorism—often referred to as their "radicalization"—and to the nature of violent extremist groups. In particular, there is an emphasis on the threats these groups pose to the global West. However, there is a dearth of scholarship both rooted in the regions most impacted by violent extremism and about the multitude of responses to this extremism, of which there are three principle types: "counter-terrorism

(CT, e.g. using military or policing resources to deter or disrupt terrorists), countering violent extremism (CVE—preventative approaches using mostly non-coercive means), and risk reduction (seeking to ensure that violent extremists do not cause harm, e.g. through efforts to change behavior)."[1] The study of deradicalization is incredibly important, and this paper will principally concentrate on case studies in Saudi Arabia and Denmark as they offer relatively more established and successful deradicalization programs, exhibiting valuable insight into effective approaches.

Defining Key Terms

To start an effective analysis of deradicalization, it is first essential to firmly grasp the elements of violent extremism. This seemingly simple task is hindered by the lack of official definitions and the significant overlap between the terms "violent extremism" and "terrorism." The European Union and United Nations (UN) appear to lack clarity on what constitutes violent extremism, although the former USAID defined it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives."[2] In a 2023 report, the U.S. Institute of Peace defined extremist violence as "a form of violent conflict in which people employ a set of behaviors that promote, support, or perpetrate violence to change existing political or social orders, and that advances an us-versus-them narrative that justifies killing, removing, or taking other violent actions against people who belong to particular social or political groups."[3] They clarify their lexical choices, stating that they use "extremist violence" as opposed to "violent extremism" to "emphasize the violent behavior, rather than the extremist ideology, as the primary locus of change. Additionally, the term extremist violence avoids categorizing a diverse cohort of people as violent extremists, regardless of legal status or actual level of involvement in extremist violence by those often covered by the term."[4] Legal definitions of terrorism are similarly disjointed. Prior to 9/11, the UN Security Council had no centralized and coordinated approach to terrorism. At the end of 2001, however, the UN Security Council passed

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[1] Andrew Glazzard and Martine Zeuthen, "Violent Extremism," *GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack* no. 34 (2016), https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/violent-extremism/.

[2] Glazzard and Zeuthen, "Violent Extremism."

[3] Lisa Schirch, Chris Bosley, and Michael Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," *U.S. Institute of Peace*, 2023. https://tufts.app.box.com/s/r5tr1shmtwssw5skcir5yymur80hq5k4/file/2026482580050, 6.

[4] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 6.

Resolution 1373, which “directed all States to criminalize terrorism in domestic law.”[5] Notably, this still lacked a unified definition of terrorism and instead left that work to each individual state, resulting not only in differing interpretations but also in some states “defin[ing] terrorism to suit their own political purposes or to undermine human rights.”[6] These varying definitions raise issues by impeding international collaboration in the criminal law sphere and other areas of counterterrorism.[7] Furthermore, the lack of clarity pertaining to these terms complicates any possible distinctions between terrorism and violent extremism. However, terrorism in relevant scholarship and policy appears to generally pertain to a narrower subset of violent extremism, although the two terms are also used interchangeably. This paper will adhere to the USAID definition of violent extremism for ease of analysis, in which violent extremism means engaging in rationalized violence through various methods to achieve societal goals.

Historical Approaches and UN Action

Deradicalization as a deliberate counterterrorism method emerged mostly in the 1990s, specifically in Egypt and Algeria, before expanding globally.[8] By 2009, 34 of 192 UN Member States operated some form of a deradicalization program, including six Arab states and ten European countries, although this number has increased since then.[9] Despite growing momentum behind these approaches to countering violent extremism, they remain poorly understood as a whole, which is driven in part by a lack of overall transparency. Accordingly, an address to the Special Rapporteur on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights while Countering Terrorism from Human Rights Watch called out the “sweeping rights violations” that are justified through “deradicalization” initiatives.[10] The address highlights how

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[5] Ben Saul, “Defining Terrorism in International Law,” *NYU Law,* 2025, https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/defining_terrorism_international_law.html.

[6] Saul, “Defining Terrorism in International Law.”

[7] Ibid.

[8] Victoria Ogbuehi, “Deradicalization as Counterterrorism Strategy: A Comparative Assessment of Egypt, Somalia, Kenya, and Nigeria Strategies,” *Intergovernmental Research And Policy Journal,* October 10, 2023, https://irpj.euclid.int/articles/deradicalization-as-counterterrorism-strategy-a-comparative-assessment-of-egypt-somalia-kenya-and-nigeria-strategies/#.

[9] Hamed El-Said, “Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World,” *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, 2017, https://www.iemed.org/publication/deradicalization-experiences-in-europe-and-the-arab-world/.

[10] “UN Rights Body Should Reject Misuse of ‘Deradicalization’ Agenda as Pretext for Violations,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 5, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/05/un-rights-body-should-reject-misuse-deradicalization-agenda-pretext-violations.

China, for example, has abused the lack of a clear international consensus regarding definitions of extremism and deradicalization to target groups "based on nothing other than their identity, language, culture or religion" without cause.[11] Not only do these practices of "re-education," among others, consist of clear human rights violations, but they can also further drive radicalization and thus extremism itself. Although the bulk of countering violent extremism falls to individual states to address as they see fit, the UN has taken some action, rooted in the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS). This strategy emphasizes both the primary role of states in countering terrorism and terrorism's unacceptability.[12] Adopted by consensus in 2006, it is revisited every couple of years and implemented through eight Global Compact Working Groups.[13]

Additionally, the UN Secretary-General's 2015 "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," urges states to: develop appropriate strategies for dealing with foreign terrorist fighters, involve religious leaders in countering terrorism, ensure accountability for gross human rights violations through violent extremism, and develop programs to disengage individuals from violent extremism through "educational and economic opportunities."[14] It also repeatedly calls on states to consider the role of gender in all of these pursuits. On January 15, 2016, the UN Secretary-General laid out over 70 recommendations for measures to restrict the proliferation of violent extremism in the "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," describing it as "an appeal for concerted action by the international community."[15] On July 1 of that year, the UN General Assembly jointly adopted resolution 70/291, through which they recognized "...the importance of preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, and in this regard ... recommen[d] that Member States consider the implementation of relevant recommendations of the Plan of Action, as applicable to the national context."[16] These UN efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism are driven by the belief that it "undermines peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. No country or region is immune from its impacts."[17] To this end, the Office of Counter-Terrorism was established in 2017 to facilitate states' cooperation with the UN in addressing terrorism.[18] However, terrorism has become more concentrated in recent years. Accordingly, the Global Terrorism Index 2024 reported that "the number of countries recording at least one death from terrorism fell to 41 in 2023, down from 44 in 2022 and 57 in 2015."[19] Currently, there is clear room for improvement in ensuring effective global implementations of deradicalization programs that respect human rights.

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[11] "UN Rights Body Should Reject Misuse of 'Deradicalization' Agenda as Pretext for Violations."

[12] UN General Assembly, Res. 70/291, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, A/RES/70/291, 1-4 (July 1, 2016), https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/291.

[13] "OHCHR and Terrorism and Violent Extremism," *United Nations*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.ohchr.org/en/terrorism#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20standardized%20definition%20of%20terrorism.,serious%20injury%2C%20or%20the%20taking%20of%20hostages.

[14] UN General Assembly, Report 70/674, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, A/70/674, art. IV 49 c (December 24, 2015), https://docs.un.org/en/A/70/674.

[15] "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," *United Nations,* Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/plan-of-action-to-prevent-violent-extremism

[16] A/RES/70/291,10.

Why People Turn Toward Extremism

Although there is a lack of cohesive statistical data regarding the ways in which people become involved in violent extremism, existing qualitative data has largely divided motivators into "push" factors, those which drive people away from their existing circumstances, and "pull" factors, those which directly attract people toward extremist ideologies.[20] Broadly speaking, push factors are adverse conditions in an individual's environment. For instance, there is an inverse relationship between socioeconomic opportunities and the propensity of violent extremism.[21] Citizens might perceive losses of governmental legitimacy in environments with poor socioeconomic potential, which can further hamper governmental capabilities to effectively counter the violent extremism that emerges. Poverty and unemployment also strengthen the pull of extremist groups by increasing the appeal of the income these groups can provide individuals. Poor governance in general, especially when linked closely with human rights violations, can further push people toward extremism by alienating residents and kindling sympathy for such efforts.[22] Although diversity does not intrinsically increase the likelihood of extremism within a state, severely disenfranchised groups may support extremism to gain power and legitimacy so they can further their goals. Similarly, long-lasting conflict can create a breeding ground for extremism from joint factors of insufficient governance and readily exploitable grievances. Inhumane treatment in prisons and other detention facilities, along with corruption among leaders and other illegal activities, is another possible driver of radicalization.[23] Social networks are a critical factor; knowing members of extremist groups can work to facilitate assimilation with the group, and the growing use of online tools has made this process even easier.[24] It is important to note, however, that while the background conditions for violent extremism are experienced by populations at large, only a select few members actually become involved in violent extremism. Individual push factors can range from exposure to violence, torture, personal oppression by domestic or foreign powers, and everyday experiences such as the denial of a loan.[25] Moreover, narratives of victimization permit for greater susceptibility to extremism, alongside "religious beliefs, ethnic differences and political ideologies."[26] Consequently, the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recommends basing domestic development policies on the Sustainable Development Goals to comprehensively reduce these bridges to violent extremism. However, there are a multitude of positive feedback loops that inhibit such efforts. Violent extremism both exacerbates domestic problems and further exploits existing ones, leading to a vicious cycle of worsening social and political conditions.[27] It also impedes the ability of external development actors, including UN field personnel and peacekeeping missions, to support progress toward improved societal welfare by targeting these actors. Furthermore, there has been an increase in forcibly displaced people, partly because of violent extremism.[28] These displaced people are in turn more susceptible to forced recruitment by extremist groups.

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[17] "International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and When Conducive to Terrorism." *United Nations*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.un.org/en/observances/prevention-extremism-when-conducive-terrorism-day.

[18] "International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and When Conducive to Terrorism."

[19] "Global Terrorism Index 2024," *The Institute for Economics & Peace*, February 2024, https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf, 2.

[20] Report 70/674, art. III 23.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

Counterterrorism vs. Deradicalization

The U.S. launched the Global War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks, employing both aggressive military interventions and humanitarian projects in its counterterrorism efforts. On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."[29] Since then, the U.S. State Department has maintained the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, which is compiled based on the following regulations:

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., art. III 37.

[25] Ibid., art. III 33.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., art. II 16.

[28] Ibid., art. II 21.

[29] "Global War on Terror," *George W. Bush Library*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror.

> Pursuant to Section 219 of the INA, the Secretary of State is authorized to designate an organization as an FTO if such an entity meets three criteria: the suspected terrorist group must (1) be a foreign organization; (2) engage in "terrorist activity," "terrorism," or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or economic interests of the United States.[30]

Terrorism is defined in Section 140(d)(2) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."[31] Once a group makes the list, no one from the U.S. can "knowingly provide 'material support or resources,'" including financial institutions. The list also helps to promote awareness and isolate the organization globally by reducing support for them.[32] However, the rate at which groups are added to this list far exceeds the rate at which groups are removed, or "delisted."[33] Consequently, there has been an increasing belief that the more traditional security-based counterterrorism measures are insufficient in reducing the proliferation of violent extremism.[34] In separating people previously engaged in violent extremism, there are two principal processes: deradicalization, which entails "the process of divorcing a person, voluntarily or otherwise, from their extreme views" and disengagement, or "the process of moving a person away from their extreme group's activities, without necessarily deradicalizing that person or changing their views."[35] This is distinct from the more proactive approach of counter-radicalization, which refers to methods implemented to prevent initial engagement with extremism in the first place.[36] Although deradicalization programs are more focused on peacefully separating people from violent extremism than traditional counterterrorism approaches, current initiatives are far from perfect solutions.[37] The programs under this umbrella of trying to reduce violent extremism are incredibly diverse, and abundant questions remain as to what makes them more or less effective.

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[30] "The Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) List," Congress.gov, December 12, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10613.

[31] *Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1987,* HR 1777, 100th Cong., *Congressional Record* 133 (Dec. 22, 1987).

[32] "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *United States Department of State*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations.

[33] "Executive Order 13224." *United States Department of State*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/.

[34] Report 70/674, art. I 4.

[35] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," *International Peace Institute*, June 2010, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/a_new_approach_epub.pdf, 2.

[36] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," 2.

Varying Focuses

When discussing post-conflict processes, an emphasis is often placed on retributive justice. There are numerous explanations supporting this approach. For instance, the severe nature of the crimes committed by violent extremists arguably warrants a harsh approach. Letting terrorists "off easy" can dishearten and destabilize communities that experienced significant harm at the hands of these extremists.[38] Although amnesty is often the approach to reintegrating former violent extremists because of legal impediments to prosecution, the UN Security Council's resolutions have stressed the need for prosecution as the overwhelming response for violent extremists.[39] This push, combined with the popular belief that these offenders "pose an outsized threat owing to their operational experience and extremist networks," has led to responses including "harsh security measures, stigmatizing public discourse, and the revocation of citizenship."[40] However, empirical evidence reveals that these fears of outsized threats may be misplaced, at least in part, as the probability of substantial harm to national security declines sharply over time.[41] There has been considerable debate over the security, legal, political, and societal risks posed by repatriating extremists.[42] Politicians and other political leaders often appear to favor the view that security concerns are paramount and thus restrict reintegration efforts. For instance, Alex Younger, the former chief of Britain's MI6, explained that the backgrounds and skillsets of returning extremists potentially make them dangers to national security, so public safety is the top priority when evaluating reintegration at any level.[43] During a set of 2014 remarks on ISIS, former U.S. president Barack Obama said that "trained and battle-hardened, these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks."[44] Indeed, these fears are not without cause. In 2015, Tunisia suffered two fatal terrorist attacks carried out by a couple of Tunisian foreign fighters and an ISIS member, resulting in the deaths of 60 individuals and the injuring of 89 individuals.[45] Returned foreign fighters are also behind the 1993 bombing attack in New York, the 2002 attack in Bali, the 2015 attack in Paris, and the 2014 attack in Brussels.[46] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser in 2015 found that the "blowback rate," or number of returning extremists that carry out attacks at home, was roughly 1 in 360.[47] This statistic has been used in attempts to subdue fears regarding repatriating extremists, although considering the deadly nature of even one attack, this number can still be troubling. A crucial piece of information largely absent from these discussions, however, is the timelines of such terrorist attacks. David Malet and Rachel Hayes reported in 2018 that the highest probability of such occurrences exists within the first five months of repatriation, after which point the threat substantially shrinks.[48] Consequently, they suggest that surveillance is justified for up to a couple of years following the return of extremists, after which point dedicating resources to any surveillance efforts is largely wasteful.[49] Evidence that these extremists are not unlimited threats is important for several reasons. For example, returning foreign fighters should not be viewed as volatile threats to be avoided no matter what, but rather as individuals for whom time and successful intervention can manage the associated risks of their return. In contrast, refusing to repatriate these individuals can maintain their threat indefinitely. Therefore, deradicalization efforts should occur during this impressionable period of five months, and up to a couple of years, to be most effective.[50]

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[37] Ibid., 1.

[38] Isidore Agbanero, "Victims' perspectives and the future of Nigeria amnesty program for ex-Boko Haram terrorists," *African Identities*, February 2026, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2621095.

[39] Chris Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," *U.S. Institute of Peace,* August 1, 2019, 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20231?seq=1.

[40] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict."

[41] Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," *GW Program on Extremism*, March 2020, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf, 8–9.

[42] Hoffman and Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," 6-7.

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[43] Damien McElroy, "MI6 Warns of 'Very Dangerous' Shamima Begum-Style Returnees," *The National*, February 16, 2019, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/mi6-warns-of-very-dangerous-shamima-begum-style-returnees-1.826247.

[44] "Transcript of Obama's Remarks on the Fight Against ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middleeast/obamas-remarks-on-the-fight-against-isis.html.

[45] Thomas Renard, "Returnees In the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia," *The Egmont Papers* 107 (n.d.): 44, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf.

[46] David Maleta and Rachel Hayes, "Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?," *Department of Homeland Security*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1497987, 5; Kim R. Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis* 61, no. 2 (2017): 212–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.02.005; Jewish Museum Murderer Convicted in Brussels," *Dw.Com*, March 7, 2019, https://www.dw.com/en/jewish-museum-murderer-convicted-in-brussels/a-47817839.

[47] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 14–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297411.

[48] Hoffman and Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," 8–9.

[49] Ibid.

However, deradicalization efforts that impose a strict and exclusive focus on punishment not only hamper beneficial progress but are often infeasible due to available resources. Firstly, the nature of these conflicts and crimes severely limits effective investigations and prosecutions because of the sheer difficulty of obtaining evidence against individuals. Secondly, even if a path toward prosecution is followed, gender biases, such as the flawed notion that "women take more passive roles," compound the lack of evidence to result in minimal sentences for women in particular.[51] Even when this process is more successful, incarceration is seldom lifelong, meaning people will inevitably live in their communities. Furthermore, some countries fundamentally lack appropriate systems for prosecuting such people.[52] While revocation of citizenship may be a more feasible solution, it is still one wrought with challenges. For instance, it is at best a short-term solution that merely relocates the problem so that countries can avoid any obligations to repatriate these individuals, and at worst exacerbates the issues and dangers at hand. Thus, while processing violent extremists through criminal justice systems has its merits, this approach is rife with drawbacks and is better combined with other deradicalization approaches.

These other pathways force some degree of reconciliation between the dual objectives of mitigating the security risks of those returning from foreign violent extremism and caring for said returnees such that they can productively reintegrate in their community.[53] There are two principal versions of deradicalization programs, both delegating ideology as the root cause of violent extremism. The first, implicit or secular deradicalization, emphasizes disengagement from violence without explicitly targeting an individual's ideology.[54] The other version, explicit or conservative deradicalization, attempts to alter behavior by causing cognitive change to alter an individual's ideology.[55] The Secretary General's Plan writes that mentorship from religious and social leaders can help otherwise-susceptible individuals repudiate violent ideologies.[56] It also explains that these community leaders, and namely the conversations they lead, help "[promote] tolerance, understanding and reconciliation between communities."[57] Accordingly, a U.S. Institute of Peace report explained that typical deradicalization initiatives utilize religion as an ideological avenue for providing "alternative interpretations of religious texts and doctrines to convince people to reject extremist views."[58] However, the U.S. Institute of Peace's Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide critiques this approach, writing the following: "Pressuring someone to change their entire worldview is exceedingly difficult and resource-intensive and can cause them to retreat further into their belief system and bolster their commitment to the cause."[59] Instead, RISE supports interventions that target improving "behavioral health and social well-being."[60] Based on these findings, providing a baseline of support and safety for individuals can help them be more receptive to ideological changes. In other words, successfully completing disengagement is likely a prerequisite for effective deradicalization programs. Strategies for accomplishing this can include support for mental, social, and physical health; educational and vocational training; strengthening social networks; legal and economic help; and observation to adjust approaches as relevant.[61] The successful involvement of affected communities is key for numerous reasons. First, community support increases program credibility. Second, they can help people cope with the abrupt losses of their social groups and sense of belonging. Furthermore, individuals who have effectively completed these deradicalization programs in the past can be instrumental in helping others working to reject extremist behavior.[62] However, it is important to heed the following guidelines from RISE to ensure a survivor-centered approach:

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 6.

[52] Ibid., 5.

[53] Ibid., 13.

[54] El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World."

[55] Ibid.

[56] Report 70/674, art III 36.

> Survivors of extremist violence should never be manipulated or coerced into participating in restorative justice processes. In some cases, mediations between survivors and people (re)integrating may both help those reintegrating take responsibility for the harm they have caused and help survivors gain a sense of justice, healing, or answers to their questions about what happened. In other cases, however, such meetings can be retraumatizing and

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 13.
[59] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 22.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 14.
[62] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," 12.

> threatening. If a survivor does not want to meet with someone who caused harm to them, they should not be forced to do so.[63]

When done properly, drawing on local norms, relationships, and practices is helpful in designing a plan to fit the local context, thus boosting its effectiveness. It is crucial to understand that the hallmarks of a successful program in one context can be substantially different in another. Location and timeframe are both important considerations when considering the local context and how best to create bridges between former extremists and the communities they are entering. Consequently, having a baseline understanding of deradicalization and the community it is being implemented in are important foundations for such programs.

Case Studies

Denmark

In 2018, the number of per capita foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) that Denmark sent abroad was among the highest in Europe, second only to Belgium.[64] An estimated 150 Danes, out of a population of approximately 6 million, went to Iraq and Syria to engage in terrorism, with many returning to Denmark afterward.[65] Denmark's program to prevent radicalization, the Aarhus Model, was created between 2007 and 2009 and implemented in 2010.[66] Three years later, this approach was expanded to include a program to deradicalize returning foreign fighters.[67] This updated model focuses on respecting the rights of participants and puts little to no emphasis on altering their ideology. Instead, it seeks to redirect existing beliefs and behaviors into legal activities, resulting in a uniquely secular program.[68] Concentrated in the city of Aarhus, the program is based on three key tenets: inclusion; collaboration between the public and private sectors; and scientific evidence.[69] To this end, it draws in a variety of experts at Aarhus University (including those with their anti- and de-radicalization program), social services members, and national security officials, among others.[70] As highlighted earlier, a strong understanding of motives for initial radicalization is integral to the development of deradicalization programs. The evidenced-backed approach undertaken in Denmark increases effectiveness and protects human rights by grounding methods in appropriate solutions rather than political strategies and abuse.

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[63] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 145.

[64] Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 3 (2019): 13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26617829, 13.

[65] "World Bank Open Data," *World Bank Open Data*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://data.worldbank.org;
Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 13.

[66] "Aarhus Model: Prevention of Radicalisation and Discrimination in Aarhus - Migration and Home Affairs," *European Commission*, April 18, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/aarhus-model-prevention-radicalisation-and-discrimination-aarhus_en.

[67] Preben Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," *Panorama - Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, January 2015, 245.

Notably, the exit program under the Aarhus Model is voluntary and only for people who have not committed crimes under Danish law.[71] Denmark puts these individuals through risk assessments and then tailored rehabilitation, which includes "mentorship, housing and economic support, medical treatment, mental health and psychosocial support, and periodic risk assessment."[72] Arguably, the most impactful of these components is the mentorship provided to participants. The mentors help redirect activism and other behaviors toward legal channels, reintegrate mentees into their communities, and serve as conversational partners for everything from quotidian struggles to epistemic questions about life. Support is also given to parents of children in the program to incorporate participants' communities in combating radicalization.[73] As a result of Denmark's efforts, between 2013 and 2015, the number of FTFs leaving from Aarhus dropped from 31 to one.[74] Additionally, no cases of recidivism were documented from 2013 to 2017.[75] There are also some links between these efforts and preventing radicalization in the first place.[76] However, the comprehensiveness of this program makes it quite resource-intense. As a result of the tailored approach it utilizes, there is no set time frame for completion. The number of contributories that help enact it also obscures the financial costs.

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[68] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 245;
El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World."

[69] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 242.

[70] Ibid., 245.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 14-15.

[73] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 245.

[74] Kelly Cobiella, "Soft or Successful? Jihadis Reintegrated, Not Punished," *NBC News*, May 24, 2015, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/denmark-de-radicalization-n355346.

[75] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 15.

[76] Jessica Stern and Marisa L. Porges, "Getting Deradicalization Right," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2010): 155–57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25680969.

Since Denmark's principal objective with returning foreign fighters is prosecution, not everyone is eligible for this exit program.[77] The program is also not a route to obtaining reduced sentences, and life imprisonment is still possible for individuals convicted of terrorism.[78] Punishments can also include passport loss, travel bans, and citizenship removal (if this does not make the individual stateless).[79] That being said, there are additional deradicalization programs for those who have been incarcerated. The three-year pilot program, Back on Track, was launched in 2011 and works to mentor incarcerated people with a history of extremism.[80] These individuals are also prevented from spreading their ideologies to other inmates during this process.[81] This program was widely successful and prompted the adoption of additional strategies for combating extremism in prisons, although there were still some flaws. For instance, in 2018, inmates lost all internet access following the discovery of extremist material on several PlayStation consoles within one of the prisons in Denmark.[82]

The program has also attracted attention to its "soft" approach with violent extremists, which stands in sharp contrast to many other Western countries. To this end, it has drawn some domestic opposition. In fact, Danish legislator Martin Henriksen has stated that, "[The program] sends a signal of weakness that instead of punishing the so-called holy warriors, they're given all the advantages of a welfare state."[83] It is worth noting, however, that Henriksen has a history of Islamophobic views, having previously said that "Islam has since its inception been a terrorist movement," and confirming that his political party "aim[ed] to ban the construction of mosques in cities where there are 'social problems.'"[84] Thus, this represents a heavily biased view that likely fails to account for real effects. He is not alone, though, in thinking that a greater emphasis should be placed on punitive consequences.[85] Former Aarhus Police Superintendent Allan Aarslev, one of the creators of the Aarhus Model, has pushed back on this perspective that the program is too lenient, explaining that it is "difficult ... it demands strategy, it demands skills," and is not a replacement for prosecution.[86] Public perception and support are not the only challenge the program faces. The lack of clear authority figures during periods of transition for the participants and the difficulty in ensuring the safety of frontline staff are also key issues.[87]

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[77] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/DK-11272018.pdf.

[78] "Denmark," *Laws on Countering Terrorism Worldwide*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://counterterrorlaw.info/country/denmark.

[79] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," 8.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 14.

[82] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," 8.

[83] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.

[84] Jacob Holdt and Rune Engelbreth Larsen, "An Open Letter to Barack Obama: On Danish Racism," *Panhumanism.com*, https://www.panhumanism.com/letter_to_obama.php; Alicia Buller, "Outrage as Danish MP Calls for Muslims to Worship in Warehouses," *Arab News*, January 5, 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1219761/world.

Overall, however, Denmark is distinct in that it has the necessary institutions, infrastructure, and a small enough population of offenders to support an initiative that balances prosecution and rehabilitation. Not only that, but it is an important case study for numerous reasons. It is uniquely secular and more focused on behavioral over ideological change. However, it is still effective in supporting the previously discussed findings that complete disengagement requires holistic care instead of isolated and aggressive attempts to change ideology. Perhaps more importantly, it reveals that the secular or religious nature of the program is not a hallmark of success but rather support and mentorship for participants are. However, this brings up questions as to how effective a secular approach is on a significantly larger scale, especially when combined with less accessibility to resources. In other words, the efficacy of using a shared religion in creating a supportive environment for larger groups of individuals is ambiguous. Furthermore, the extent to which participants should be separated from each other is unclear but important to clarify for modeling this program, particularly on a larger scale where separation is more difficult.

Denmark's approach to prosecution does not leave people stateless, thereby helping to protect basic rights. In taking accountability for their own citizens, Denmark has not faced any significant national security challenges, which should serve as a signal to other countries that security fears should not impede rehabilitation efforts. That being said, countries should take security concerns into consideration with their own deradicalization programs. Denmark's inclusion of rehabilitation programs within prisons and its reliance on collaborations with academic institutions are characteristics of its program that should be adopted in other countries for maximum effectiveness. To facilitate this, however, Denmark should increase publications of its methods as much as possible without incurring additional security concerns.

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[85] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.

[86] Cobiella, "Soft or Successful?"

[87] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.

Saudi Arabia

Notwithstanding the Saudi government's conservative Islamic nature, religious extremists and militants still pose a threat to the state. Following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the Saudi government stepped up its counter-terrorism efforts, but the failures of these measures were fatally exposed in May 2003 when 27 people died in an al-Qaeda attack in Riyadh. This prompted the development of Saudi Arabia's official deradicalization program, which was rolled out in 2004.[88] It was designed to "'deprogram' jihadist radicals" and substantially mitigate the security threat they posed by using religious and psychological services.[89] Since its inception, the program has increased significantly in size and status.[90] The first phase emphasizes religious re-education, relying on Saudi Arabia's geographic centrality in Islam and legitimization from many influential religious scholars.[91] Initial reports pointed to a 100 percent success rate for the program, although more recent estimates suggest recidivism rates of up to 20 percent.[92] However, such recidivism measures are complicated by the inability for an extended observation of the long-term impacts thus far, and vague qualifications as to what counts as recidivism in this specific context. Additionally, success has been minimal among the most extreme militants. Notably, according to a 2009 report, 11 graduates of the Saudi program re-engaged in terrorism following their release from Guantanamo, including one of whom quickly assumed the position of deputy commander of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[93]

As in Denmark, completion of this program—or lack thereof—has no bearing on an individual's prison sentence.[94] Since 2004, approximately 4,000 people have graduated from it.[95] The program was created to address three core areas: "ideological changes, vocational training and financial support, and ensuring security of the former radicals."[96] Religious leaders, psychologists, and security officials work together to achieve these goals through a "six-week rehabilitation course, counseling sessions, and an aftercare program that helps reintegrate them into Saudi society."[97] Over time, the counseling aspect of the program has grown in relevance. Typically, Western-educated mentors administer tailored therapy and confirm the successful deradicalization of participants.[98] The relationships developed during the mentorship stage boost program success by enhancing understanding of participants' individual progress while also improving participants' often warped views of civil servants and authority more generally. This is key as cynical views of the government may have contributed to individuals' earlier extremism.

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[88] Andreas Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study," *Middle East Institute*, June 10, 2015, https://mei.edu/publication/deradicalization-programs-saudi-arabia-case-study/.

[89] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."

[90] Marisa L. Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 22, 2010, https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment.

[91] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."

[92] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."

[93] Ibid.

[94] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."

[95] Ibid.

Another unique and significant component of this program is the "halfway house," where program participants remain for two to three months prior to their full reintegration into society. At the halfway house, the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, participants continue receiving counseling, while also taking part in recreational activities and obtaining vocational coaching.[99] Families are given social support and are in charge of monitoring and helping participants following their release from the program.[100] That being said, the government still maintains a degree of surveillance over graduates for security purposes. To further reintegrate individuals into society, if they lack familial support, the government "provides assistance in finding wives for the predominantly young, male detainees, and pays for the wedding, the dowry and even an apartment and car."[101] Thus, the scope of this initiative truly stands out by touching every part of detainees' lives. The financial cost of such a program is not public, although the resource-intense and Saudi-specific nature of the program limits its applicability internationally. An additional benefit of such a comprehensive program, however, is that it can go beyond deradicalization to assist counter-radicalization through the relationships with communities that are established.[102]

The Saudi program has also improved over time. For instance, program officials have gradually de-emphasized efforts targeted at changing ideology and instead shifted toward a greater concentration on behavioral changes.[103] This example of learning from experience also echoes recommendations in RISE to focus on actions, not beliefs and sacred values. However, especially owing to the legitimacy the government draws from Islam, the program is by no means secular.

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."

[98] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."

[99] Ibid.

[100] Christopher Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2008, 20, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ceip/0007792/f_0007792_6483.pdf.

[101] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."

[102] Stern and Porges, "Getting Deradicalization Right," 156.

The role of relatives has also expanded beyond simply visiting participants and assuming responsibility for graduates to now actively engaging in the deradicalization program alongside program experts to increase program buy-in.[104] Greater monitoring efforts of detainees have also been put in place both during the program and after completion.[105] Despite providing considerable transitional support, however, the Saudi program is still dependent on after-care and post-graduation surveillance of participants. It has also struggled with reintegrating the most radical violent extremists, even with extensive resources available. With Saudi Arabia's counseling center and emphasis on family support, the program addresses some of the Aarhus Model's primary struggles in providing support during transitions. However, cultural family dynamics in Saudi Arabia—namely the family as a strong social unit—allow for the functioning and success of the program in a way that is not universally replicable. Despite these obvious differences, the two case studies share an interesting and illuminating array of characteristics. For instance, both contain a balance of prosecution and rehabilitation, an emphasis on behavioral change over ideological change, the support of ample resources, and the incorporation of family and other community members.

Saudi Arabia's program also reveals that it is possible to implement deradicalization on a broad scale. It has a more structured program than Denmark yet still provides personalized attention. Its utilization of community support is a crucial factor that reduces costs and ensures success despite the large program size. Although this program supports the necessity of community and connection, as well as holistic support including education and vocational training, it also emphasizes that a program devoid of ideology and religion is not always possible given the sociocultural context. Rather, it blends more conventionally "Western" counseling with "non-Western" social and cultural support. Saudi Arabia's program is also more culturally and religiously grounded than Denmark's, as exemplified by the provision of dowries and wives to some program members. Saudi Arabia is unique in its ability to fund a program so generous that it has been attacked for providing "luxury hotels for terrorists."[106] Yet, the "luxuriousness" of transitional housing is not a requisite for effective deradicalization. Additionally, it is relevant to note that while numerous countries have cited security concerns as reasoning behind their hesitation to repatriate and rehabilitate extremists, Saudi Arabia created this deradicalization program out of security-related fears. The creators realized that this approach was preferable to the outcome if they did not more proactively address extremism, especially given the relatively high number of radicalized extremists residing within its borders. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's efforts are instructive to countries that are contemplating mechanisms for counter and de-radicalization, especially as they relate to security concerns.

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[103] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."

[104] Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy," 13.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Sara Brzuszkiewicz, "Saudi Arabia: The de-Radicalization Program Seen from Within," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, June 14, 2017,

Policy Recommendations and Implications

Next Steps for Denmark and Saudi Arabia

I propose several policy recommendations for the deradicalization programs in Denmark and Saudi Arabia. For instance, to address the unstable periods of transition, Denmark should increase family and community involvement and maintain ties between participants and their mentors for longer periods. Thorough monitoring of participants' mental health and comprehensive training for program members will help protect frontline staff. Greater transparency and public awareness of the program can also help remediate negative public opinion regarding the deradicalization efforts. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, should develop a reliable screening process for identifying the most extreme militants. Collaborating with academics and other experts, including the program counselors, would help reduce national security risks in doing so. However, the Saudis should ensure that additional monitoring does not result in further human rights violations. Although Saudi Arabia faces limitations in measuring recidivism rates owing in part to a lack of transparency and unified consensus on criteria for success, more efforts should be made to follow up with graduates of the program and maintain connections to monitor continued success rates.[107]

Increased Transparency

Furthermore, both Denmark and Saudi Arabia should increase the transparency of their programs and what they have learned from their respective

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https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/saudi-arabia-de-radicalization-program-seen-within-16484.

[107] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."

experiences. This would serve numerous purposes. First, it facilitates the development of effective programs elsewhere by enhancing global understanding of the methods that do and do not work in addressing terrorism and radicalization. Additionally, easier development can reduce program costs, which address an important concern with them examined in the case studies. Greater international transparency in methods and results would also help expose when countries are violating human rights in their approaches. Abuse could also be curtailed by reaching a more stringent consensus regarding relevant international definitions, thereby reducing vulnerability to manipulation.

Further Scholarship

Additional research is also needed in numerous areas. For instance, substantially more efforts should be dedicated to understanding the varying roles gender plays and how women become engaged and disengaged in violent extremism. Similar to men, this includes how they do not always fall in the neat binary of victim or perpetrator. Sexual violence can also hamper women's deradicalization and reintegration due to social stigmatization and lack of support. The issue of creating more fiscally conservative—and thus replicable—programs also necessitate further exploration regarding the impact of religious programming and whether keeping participants together or separating them is more effective. These recommendations, if implemented, could be a more resource-efficient way to address the pressing issue of violent extremism.

Conclusion

While there have been many recent developments in the field of deradicalization, significant knowledge gaps remain. This is partly driven by the lack of historical data available to analyze the most effective deradicalization approaches. Additionally, it is important to consider that there may be overlap between the perceived success of deradicalization programs and cases in which individuals become disillusioned, altering their ideology and behavior independently of completing these programs. However, some clear trends are emerging. Efforts were made to select well-established and successful deradicalization programs from which to draw lessons for the case studies. It should not be a surprise that these programs echoed other findings that strictly targeting ideology is not an effective approach. Instead, more comprehensive support for rehabilitation should be given, in tandem with appropriate prosecution. For countries that cannot dedicate resources comparable to those of Denmark and Saudi Arabia, many questions remain, especially in the face of declining U.S. foreign aid. This issue is especially problematic given the demonstrated abuse of "deradicalization" initiatives. A greater incorporation of community members, which should include providing them with support and appropriate training, should be a central method for reducing program costs given these global trends. Relying more on these social networks can help build the requisite bridges for successful programs.

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