ISIS-related attacks in North America, overwhelmingly committed by born citizens of the respective countries, have shown the urgency and necessity to directly deal with these individuals in order to temper their overall views, and move away from violent extremism. Particularly in the American context, this has become more important since the December 2015 attack of San Bernardino where a couple, husband and wife, attacked and killed 14 people and wounded 20. The June 2016 Orlando night club attack that led to the death of 50 individuals and the injury of the same number was explicitly claimed by an ISIS supporter. In October 2017, another attack took place on a Manhattan pedestrian walkway, where a man used a rented U-Haul truck to kill eight, and wound 11.

According to figures released by George Washington University’s “Program on Extremism,” there have already been 196 persons charged with offenses related to ISIS, with 146 having pleaded guilty (George Washington University, 2019). Prior to the emergence of ISIS there, of course, have been similar cases and arrests related to extremism in the name of Islam. In 2001, shortly after the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, John Walker Lindh, dubbed “the American Taliban,” was captured and imprisoned by the United States for his involvement with the terrorist group. Moreover, approximately 40 Americans and 20 Canadians, overwhelmingly of Somali origin, had gone to join the Al Qaeda affiliate, Al Shabab, in Somalia. This included the first American suicide bomber, Shirwa Ahmed, from Minneapolis. A number of factors were given for this: bicultural identity integration and rejecting Western identity, heightened interest in Islam, and the lure of “jihadi culture” (King & Mohamed 2011). In the American context, however, the United States remains a primary target for these extremist and terrorist groups, not just for operations but also for recruiting potential future perpetrators.

There is a prevalent assumption in the popular media, as well as among some terrorism scholars, that Canada is largely immune from terrorist attacks and has experienced the problem of radicalization at a much lower scale than Europe and the United States (Tomlinson...
There is some truth to this, comparatively speaking, but there is also a heavy dose of wishful thinking involved. In 2006, for instance, 18 young people in Canada were arrested for planning and preparing for a series of attacks, including one on Canada’s Parliament Hill (Teotonia 2010; Speckhard & Mubin 2014). Canadians have also been among foreign fighter mobilizations in the past, whether it be Bosnia, Chechnya, or Somalia. More recently, our own research shows that close to 100 young men and women have left Canada to join a variety of militant and terrorist groups active in Syria and Iraq (Amarasingam 2015; Gurski 2016).

Several Canadians have also been involved in plots and attacks locally and abroad that have caused a significant number of civilian casualties. In October 2014, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau fatally shot Corporal Nathan Cirillo and then entered the parliament buildings in Ottawa before being shot dead. Two days earlier, Martin Couture-Rouleau rammed his car into two Canadian Forces members, killing one. Salman Ashrafi, a young man from Calgary, blew himself up in Iraq in November 2013, killing and injuring over 40. Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, who lived for a time in both Windsor and Calgary, somehow found his way into the leadership of ISIS in Bangladesh and masterminded the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016, which saw 22 people hacked to death (Amarasingam 2016).

Canadian law enforcement and policy makers have wrestled with how to handle this situation for some time, but there has been renewed urgency and increased funding particularly since 2011 with the launch of the Kanishka Project, a five-year $10-million initiative designed to not only address gaps in the understanding of terrorism in Canada but also establish a better knowledge-sharing relationship between academics, law enforcement, and policy makers. As the Kanishka Project came to an end, Ottawa established the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (CCCEPV), which is focused on providing funding at the local level to organizations working on the issue of radicalization and prevention. While still in its infancy, this broader federal program seeks to aid local community groups to intervene to prevent radicalization to violence, rehabilitate imprisoned terrorists and returning foreign fighters, and provide alternatives to a variety of violent ideologies. It is important to note for both the American and Canadian context; governmental agencies are not direct service providers of deradicalization interventions or disengagement from violent extremism.

Radicalization, deradicalization, and disengagement

Much attention has been given to the role of radicalization in violent extremism and terrorism. In a way, understanding mechanisms of radicalization, which is usually seen as a pre-extremism stage, is relevant to understanding the origins and processes of violent extremism and, therefore, key for preventing and countering it. With this in mind, what states and actors are trying to prevent and counter is a radicalization that is problematic. Problematic radicalization means a noticeable change in the individual’s or the group’s beliefs and behaviors in ways that justify illegal violence against the state’s institutions or members of an out-group. However, it is difficult to tackle radicalization outside the realms of violence and illegality. In politically vibrant societies, opponents and their views can be defined as radicals or even extremists.

As terrorism is a political activity (Cottee & Hayward 2011, 966), so is radicalization. It is a contested term that means different things to different people. Rather than providing a general theoretical frame of the phenomenon, it is essential to separately theorize radicalization of thought (which usually falls within the boundaries of the law and legality), and behavioral radicalization, which promotes violence, be it political or religious (Tiflati 2016).
Using a slightly different terminology, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008, 213) state that “Radicalization of opinion is a phenomenon of mass psychology, whereas radicalization of action is a phenomenon of individual and small-group psychology.” However, while the focus is usually on the violent part of radicalization, its social aspect should not be ignored. For instance, involvement in many radical groups can be more of a matter of “joining” than being recruited and lured by an agent (Cronin 2006, 34).

There is no single profile or cause behind radicalization. Looking at the “profiles” of radicals, Bjørgo (2011, 279) stated that radicalization is not, and cannot be, linked to one specific status, be it ideological or non-ideological, political or apolitical, socially adapted or marginalized. In fact, radicals come from all sorts of backgrounds. While a few may fantasize about adventures, heroism, and militancy (Bjørgo 2011, 283), others might be drawn by feelings of victimization and a sense of injustice. Profiling seems to be very limited in terms of identifying “potential terrorists.” Individuals who really constitute a threat may go unnoticed because “they do not fit the stereotype” (Bjørgo 2011, 278). Cottee and Hayward (2011), for instance, identify three main motives for engaging in violent radicalization, which are excitement, meaning, and glory. Furthermore, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) distinguish between individual, group, and mass radicalization. The first is usually linked to victimization, political grievances, and affiliation with radical groups; the second refers to radicalization within like-minded groups competing for support or for political power; and the third happens in relation to a “hated” out-group. While responding to non-state terrorism from threatening non-state groups, states can also become radicalized when facing interstate conflicts or homegrown terrorism.

Socialization into radicalization is a complex process during which individuals become radicalized for multiple reasons (i.e., political, religious, social, cultural, personal, ideological). Many feel that the real challenge at this point is how to prevent and/or reverse radicalization. Just as radicalization is a complex non-linear process, so is the process of deradicalization and disengagement from violent extremism. That said, there are many narratives and initiatives of deradicalization. According to Daniel Koehler (2017), there are three different counter-terrorism methods: prevention, repression, and intervention, and these methods operate in three dimensions “macrosocial/national; mesosocial/regional/local; and microsocial/individual.” As we cannot address them all in one go, we will examine a few that we think are more relevant to this volume.

According to Koehler (2017, 20), debates surrounding deradicalization have resulted in the birth of two main schools of thought; whereas the first sees success in abstaining from violence, the second insists that rejecting the ideology of violence is also crucial to “long-term disengagement.” Additionally, ideology, be it religious or political, cannot – and does not – flourish in a vacuum; it always has a context and a frame (i.e., political, religious, social, cultural, etc.). Violent radicals, religiously or politically inspired, engage in an “identity project of personal self-affirmation” (Cottee & Hayward 2011, 976). Therefore, disengagement from terrorism is not a sign of deradicalization (Horgan 2009). Furthermore, deradicalization programs need to be tailored to the would-be deradicalized or disengaged (Bjørgo 2011, 279). When tackling questions of deradicalization, it is important to distinguish radical groups from radical individuals. Unlike radical groups which cannot flourish without having a popular base, most individuals can easily get radicalized without such support or sympathy (Cronin 2006, 27).

Moreover, deradicalization can be seen as a moral disengagement or an ideological disenchantment from violent extremism-justifying ideologies. According to Kruglanski et al. (2014, 77), these ideologies have three main components: grievance because of an injustice, a presumed perpetrator for such grievance, and a (moral) obligation to fight and remove this
injustice. Whereas disengagement might infer giving up the radical behavior, deradicalization infers fully disregarding the radical ideology. Likewise, understanding the target audience and the target ideology is crucial to producing the right counter-narrative. For example, if the aim is to counter a religious radicalization, a theological discourse should be employed. While some experts insist that “evilizing” terrorists is the right strategy to deal with and prevent their threat, others (such as Dawson 2017, 4) suggest that humanizing them might help us understand how normal and balanced individuals make the transition from law-abiding citizens to violent extremists.

Even though everyday discourse links terrorism to non-state actors that represent a challenge or a threat to the state (McCauley & Moskalenko 2008, 416), states are also perpetrators of terrorism. There is also a focus on Islamist extremism “at the expense of right-wing, nationalist, neoliberal, and/or state violence” (Finn & Moman 2017). Although the emphasis of CVE is usually on Muslim perpetrators, incidents committed by lone-wolf terrorists such as Alexandre Bissonnette (the Quebec mosque attacker who killed six Muslims and injured many others) show that the danger of national security arises from multiple forms of violent ideologies. In what follows, we briefly examine the definitional and theoretical issues around the question of deradicalization before examining some not-for-profit prevention and deradicalization initiatives in Canada and the United States.

**Deradicalization programs in Canada and the United States**

Due to the small number of individuals in the North American Muslim community engaging in terrorism, there are very few actual deradicalization programs. In fact, the discourse related to the topic is significantly underdeveloped in the North American context, especially the United States. “Countering violent extremism,” popularly referred to as “CVE,” has been introduced into the American context very recently and is “best understood as a series of fits and starts” (Hughes 2017). Beginning in 2011, it has since gone through a number of attempts at seeking to create a mechanism whereby the issues related to the identification and intervention of extremist individuals and groups can be discussed maturely. This, however, seems obfuscated by the fact that CVE in the United States has undergone significant criticism and repudiation by various Muslim communities as well as non-Muslim ones, both having shared as well as divergent views about the theoretical program.

One of the primary arguments made by Muslim organizations critical of CVE is that such community-wide change cannot occur as a top-down, government-driven approach (CAIR 2015). Furthermore, they argue that such programs which identify only one minority group (Muslims) and ignore others (far-right radicalization) are marginalizing the community and reinforcing systemic discrimination. While their respective view of CVE may be flawed in relation to understanding the theories underpinning the subject there was also the mistaken view that the CVE program of 2011 only focused on one group. Unfortunately, recent changes under the Trump administration to refocus CVE solely on the so-called Islamist threat and largely ignore the far right has further eroded the trust that Muslim organizations were developing in these initiatives (Pasha-Robonson 2017).

While the policy prescriptions around who is identified, how they are identified, and what works is still being debated, organizations critical of the government-driven CVE model have begun developing their own in-house capacity at the community level (Hauslochner 2016). It will remain to be seen how effective and legitimate such programs are, and whether they will alienate members of their community. It will also be important to watch how these ideas develop in light of increasingly violent attacks by the far right and other...
white supremacist groups in Canada and the United States, as well as increasing Islamophobia serving to focus the community on the threat against them from the outside, as opposed to from within.

Based on our research in North America, it is clear that a basic distinction needs to be made between prevention programs and initiatives dedicated to targeted interventions. The former is what many Muslim organizations are already doing in terms of castigating unlawful violence in the name of Islam, promoting pro-social values, and the teaching of traditional Islamic values. As research has shown, individuals who have a solid religious identity are in fact better “inoculated” against violent ideas than those who lack it (Tiftati 2016). The latter category has much fewer examples in the North American context. While some organizations are contacted by friends and families of individuals with the hope that some kind of “intervention” will take place, these programs are scattered and do not operate according to any established set of practices. Nevertheless, there are indeed a select few organizations working in this space. Below, we briefly examine their work.

Deradicalization initiatives in Canada

One of the earliest-established organizations that continue to work in this space is the Anjuman-E-Islahul Muslimin (AIM), founded and administered by Mohammad Shahied Shaikh. Based in Toronto (full disclosure: Mr. Shaikh is also the father of the lead author) the primary demographic of Masjid El Noor is South Asians from India and Pakistan. The center also caters to African and Arab worshippers as well as converts from diverse backgrounds. It also administers an Islamic school for children, as well as public lessons on Islam. Alongside devotional services, some members of the organization participate in professional social service projects. They are professionals in their respective fields and have varying knowledge of psychosocial counseling. On the prevention side, the organization acts as other Canadian Muslim organizations with the madrasa-style Islamic school for children and provides a standard version of Islam that rejects violent extremism. Masjid El Noor has also proactively engaged with young people on issues of youth violence in general and also participates in local interfaith events and meetings with government and grassroots community organizations.

At an initial judicial hearing, the lawyer for the defendant can submit to the court that this counseling will be undertaken and a report will be issued by the organization for consideration by the presiding judge. Often, the accused is put on probation and released to the care of the organization. In cases where an individual is remanded into custody and a bail hearing is required, participation in the counseling can result in relaxed or removed probation conditions. It is worthwhile noting that most clients’ cases in this regard are not extremism- or violent extremism-related but rather deal with general issues of violence including weapons charges. The organization understands that the context of gang-related violence is intimately connected as an at-risk factor in joining other violent extremist groups.

Interviews with the clients of this program were conducted anonymously in full protection of their privacy. Unstructured, open-ended questions were asked in order to understand the person’s personal history, the issues being counseled for and what they thought of the program, and why they thought it would work for them to begin with. A thematic arrangement of the testimonies yields two primary pillars as to what works: the use of trusted intermediaries and consultation with subject matter experts. Trusted intermediaries include community members who are known to care for their community and constituents. They may also be subject matter experts and professionals such as lawyers and teachers who earned the community’s trust. Besides their professional profiles, trusted intermediaries have
qualities such as a non-judgmental approach, patience, compassion, kindness, and the desire to help. This secures buy-in from the client and, in doing so, makes receiving instruction a process in which the client is personally invested.

Since this is psychosocial counseling, the content that is used in counseling violent offenders is drawn from both religious and non-religious sources. According to the service providers, religious ideology can either be the main driver or a mere passenger, with other psychosocial factors as the driver. A knowledge of basic Islamic scripture is required, as well as issues of mental health, considered against a personal background, including socioeconomic and education status. This allows the service provider to tailor the counseling to the individual, to appeal to sacred values in correcting what is defined as deviant behavior, and to frame their reintegration in the larger context of Canadian society at large.

The second organization that loosely works in the deradicalization space in Canada is known as Paradise4Ever. Founded by Mohammed Robert Heft in 2005 and funded by donations from the public, it deals primarily with new converts (Babin 2015). It is a well-known organization in Toronto and around the country, which attempts to ease the conversion process for new Muslims. Since a number of the new Muslims with whom Heft deals come from troubled backgrounds and carry with them personal experiences that put them at risk for violent extremism, Heft has found himself having to address the issue in some way. New converts often come with stories of childhood physical and sexual abuse, criminality, and imprisonment, as well as issues related to identity conflicts and a sense of meaning and belonging.

Heft’s counseling program is built on three pillars: (1) theological detox; (2) social services; and (3) community responsibility. Theological detox refers to correcting and calibrating certain theological arguments which permit outright, or otherwise encourage sympathy for, violent action in the name of Islam. The social service pillar deals with vocational and educational training for individuals. The third pillar refers to the inclusion of the individual into a larger network of peers who are supportive and reflect the sacred values held in esteem by the young person being counseled. Unlike most other Canadian Muslim organizations, Heft has a unique competency in extremism intervention due to his own firsthand experiences as well as dealing with high-profile extremism cases in Canada. Based on our research with some of the individuals Heft has worked with, it is clear that personal rapport, integrity, and authenticity are the core components of why these young people find him approachable (CBC News 2014). Heft also may make available to the client other new Muslims and individuals in order to provide the client with a larger circle of positive role models, which sometimes entails camping trips where stable social settings are introduced to the client in an environment of brotherhood and belonging.

The third organization that operates in the deradicalization space in Toronto is Imam Ramzy Ajem and Shaykh Abdul Aziz Suraqah’s Risalah Foundation. Both of these religious leaders are experts trained in classical Islamic law and provide counseling services as well as chaplaincy services for the community at large. They also administer teachings on Islam which range from matters of jurisprudence to personal matters of spirituality. The Risalah caters to first- and second-generation Muslims from various ethnic backgrounds. Both Ajem and Suraqah participated in the deradicalization counseling for two convicted and incarcerated violent extremists arrested in the 2006 Toronto terror plot. The two individuals were found guilty of planning to drive explosive-laden vehicles as part of a criminal extremist conspiracy. The two had shown a willingness to reform their views after having had time to rethink what choices in their lives brought them to where they found themselves. The
deradicalization counseling in this context was heavily influenced by traditional Islamic teachings which reframe the epistemological framework from which individuals take their knowledge, what is defined as authority in Islamic law, and why such acts are illegal in Islam to begin with. The two individuals seemed to have benefited from the intervention by admitting responsibility for the actions, repenting from the faith perspective and resolving to be engaged in CVE once released from prison.

The counseling style employed by Ajem and Suraqah is personal and up close. Once again, considering that the instructors are both trusted intermediaries as well as subject matter experts, and due to the personable nature of the instructors, individuals who work with them seem to respond positively to their approach. Furthermore, the counseling is unstructured and ad hoc and recognizes that a case-by-case basis approach to deradicalization is best. The instructors have some basic familiarity in the theories of radicalization as well as the concept of deradicalization and augment their approach by consulting professionals involved in countering radicalization.

Outside of Ontario, there are two other important initiatives in the deradicalization space, one in Calgary, Alberta, and the other in Montreal, Quebec. In Calgary, the program is led by Imam Navaid Aziz, formerly out of the 8th and 8th Musallah, a prayer space that became notorious after several individuals from there left Canada to travel to Syria and Iraq (Roberts 2016; White 2017). Aziz became the imam at this location after the center was already known in the media as a “radicalization hotspot” and was asked to identify and deal with the issues faced by young people at this location.

It is important to note that Aziz is also on contract with the Calgary police service as a chaplain where young people requiring theological intervention can be referred to by the police services. Calgary’s police service has been one of those Canadian police agencies to receive funding to deal with extremism (Graveland 2017). It has implemented its REDIRECT program, which links at-risk youth with a police officer and a social worker who attempt to steer them away from dangerous ideologies. REDIRECT gets its referrals from the schools and the community where people come forward and say they’re worried about the youth and then engage with that family to make sure they’re getting the help that they need.

Imam Aziz uses an approach where he attempts to restructure the cognitive framework in which young Muslims interpret the environment around them. It draws on historical examples of the early Muslim community as well as an introduction to Islamic legal concepts which repudiate extremist thinking and violent behavior. Furthermore, he frames his program to the youth as an opportunity to build future leaders in Canada, avoiding any mention of phrases such as CVE or buzz words like deradicalization. The reason for this is to de-securitize the approach and place it in a public, social setting removed of pejorative labels. This, according to the imam, allows community members at large, parents in particular, and at-risk youth to be able to come forward and partake in such services without fear of judgment and outside the scrutiny of security services.

While the imam does engage at-risk youth on a one-on-one basis, he deals typically with small groups (of up to 15). One strategy is to engage in a participatory approach where group activities and group projects are conducted and youth are given leadership roles within the circle. Interviews conducted with three of his clients made clear that the main reason why the program was positively received by these individuals was due to the personable nature of the imam, as well as a sense of empowerment from studying Islam in a more relaxed and friendly environment without fear of being judged or labeled (Daigle 2015).

The Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) in Montreal, unlike many of the initiatives thus far discussed, operates with the support of the
Quebec government. It is a not-for-profit organization aimed at preventing violent radicalization and providing support to individuals affected. It also provides support to individuals who are radicalized or undergoing radicalization, family or friends of such individuals, teachers, professionals, or field workers. The CPRLV is a provincially mandated organization whose work also includes the prevention of hate crimes and incidents as well as the provision of support and counseling for victims of such acts.

Interviews by the lead author were conducted with five staff members of CPRLV, as well as five young Muslims implicated in ISIS-related activity (either directly by having thought of joining ISIS overseas or family members who had done the same). Individuals who were detained but not arrested were sent to the CPRLV for assessment and intervention. The CPRLV uses a psychosocial counseling approach which does not deal with religion at all but rather, to develop a rapport between client and counselor. It utilizes creative art and group activity to achieve this. Where clients may require specialist attention with religious issues, they will direct them to Muslim experts who can speak to the issues related to Islam.

The Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Violent Extremist (CPN-PREV), established in 2016, is a research and practitioners-centered network funded by the Canadian Public Safety Center: Community Resilience Fund (CRF). The network struggles to develop Canadian leadership and excellence in countering violent radicalization and extremism. CPN-PREV supports other initiatives and collaborates with intervention teams, through sustained knowledge mobilization practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and various communities.

CPN-PREV examines the level and nature of collaboration amongst Canadian initiatives, and strengthens collaborations to build expertise in areas of urgent and high need. It also generates evidence-based practices and expands to fit the needs of Canadian practitioners. Finally, CPN-PREV, in collaboration with RAPS (www.sherpa-recherche.com/fr/sherpa/equipes-recherche/raps/), develops, adapts, and expands diverse training modules, toolkits, and other programs and activities to multiple sectors (e.g., health, social services, education, community) that work on radicalization.

Sensing some of the limitations that government agencies could have with direct deradicalization, some have moved towards a multi-agency approach, akin to the U.K.’s “Channel programme” (Home Office 2017). Recently, this same initiative has been rebranded into Canada by the FOCUS Tables of Toronto. In an initiative led by the City of Toronto, the United Way, and the Toronto Police Service, the aim is to reduce crime and victimization and to improve community resiliency and well-being. The model attempts to bring together the “most appropriate community agencies at a weekly situation table model to provide a targeted, wrap around approach to the most vulnerable individuals, families and places that are experiencing heightened levels of risk in a specific geographic location” (FOCUS Toronto 2018). A multi-agency team meets once a week to “identify individuals, groups and places that are at a high risk of anti-social and/or criminal behavior as either perpetrators or victims” (FOCUS Toronto 2018). FOCUS Toronto uses the skills and resources of diverse community partners to respond quickly to situations of elevated risk, with the hope that individuals can be reached and helped before they move into violence.

**Deradicalization in the United States**

According to researchers and policy practitioners, CVE initiatives in the United States “can best be understood as a series of fits and starts” (Hughes 2017). The 2011 domestic CVE strategy sought to better engage with local communities, build local expertise on issues of countering extremism, and to counter extremist messaging, all with a broader push away
from federal programs in favor of “local governments and partners” (Hughes 2017). While there are indeed dozens of local initiatives at work in the United States, both formal and informal, we focus on a select few below.

First, the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), led by Hediah Mirahmadi, is a non-profit, educational organization which promotes tolerance and pluralism and counters extremism. Their specialists come from various disciplines, academic as well as spiritual. Some have held government positions. WORDE uses one-on-one counseling as well as group sessions when referred to by community members as well as law enforcement. Like other Muslim organizations engaged in this space, they appeal to a hierarchical Islamic tradition (Sufi Islam) and a counseling style that is non-judgmental and in which a long-term approach is taken where religious training is augmented with vocational and educational support. While originally called the “Montgomery County Model,” it has since been renamed BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism) and transitioned into the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s Center for Health and Homeland Security to institutionalize the program.3

Another notable organization active in the United States is Muflehun, via the executive director, Humera Khan; this is a Muslim grassroots organization that provides a wide variety of services to ethnic Muslim communities. Referrals originate with the community, including family and friends; online engagement handled by the executive director employs genuine and sympathetic approaches, which lead to building personal rapports with clients. The counseling style is non-judgmental but does not lean heavily on Islamic epistemology. Rather, it is utilitarian in that it encourages individuals to think for themselves in a critical manner (Volsky & Fleischer 2015).

The personal counseling component is primarily implemented by a Sudanese-American and Islamic scholar, Imam Mohamed Magid, who employs a community-level social service approach informed by pro-social Islamic values. One of the ways in which young individuals come to his knowledge is by community members and their children as well as government agencies. Imam Magid is, at times, used as a referral by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In the case of Ali Shukri Amin, the FBI sought to have the imam have Amin take part in one of the mosque’s week-long camps, a spring retreat where teens play sports, hike trails, paddle canoes, and attend lectures on Islam (Abutaleb & Kristina 2016). It did not bear fruit and Amin was arrested, and eventually sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Another initiative working on this problem is the Muslim Public Affairs Council’s Safe Spaces program. Safe Spaces was designed to be a practical resource that uses a pluralistic approach to building resilience and healthy communities, and one which aims to reduce harm among young people as well as adults. The Safe Spaces program was predicated on the Prevention Intervention Model of Public Health, which attempts to deal with problems before they occur, and also addresses issues when community members need care. It focuses on trying to resolve difficult issues affecting the community with interventions seeking to address “troubled individuals, potentially harmful behaviors, and violence through education, outreach, assessment, treatment and referral” (Muslim Public Affairs Council 2016). The intervention component of Safe Spaces includes a basic risk assessment to properly categorize a situation that has been brought to the attention of the Community Response Team. The intervention team is trained on properly assessing situations, and distinctly identifying the differences between an individual who is making a threat and an individual who is posing a threat. At the most concerning end of the spectrum is “extreme risk.” This is when the Community Response Team should report a case to law enforcement because the chance for a potential act of violence or suicide is eminent, as the individual has clearly made a threat with specific indicators. Next is “high-risk,” which suggests a referral and a follow-up to
a mental health provider, social services worker, or a theological guide. The Safe Spaces strategy looks to be an alternative to law enforcement-run CVE strategies.4

Finally, we have the promising case of the “Terrorism Disengagement and Deradicalization” program in Minnesota News source:5 a program developed in conjunction with the German Institute for Radicalisation and Deradicalisation Studies (GIRDS) and the U.S. Probation Office, District of Minnesota. The program came from the request of the Federal Judge overseeing an ISIS prosecution of four young Somali men.6 It is the first of its kind to formally institutionalize such a program, one which pools together the expertise of trusted intermediaries and subject matter experts, based on the attempt to employ a standard related to violent extremism recidivism as well as its repudiation (Horgan & Braddock 2010; Koehler 2017). Daniel Koehler of GIRDS in fact testified as an expert that the defendants scored highly in relation to his metric, and that they warranted continuous and ongoing probationary support once eventually released.7

All said, this is only the start. There are already individuals in U.S. prisons for whom such programs could be very helpful. The U.S. Government has been aware of this issue for some time,8 but has not moved beyond the standard surveillance and undercover operation heavy approach and instead, planning for the eventual release of such individuals. By linking such programs directly to the Judges and Probation Offices to whom the task of prosecution and post-incarceration will ultimately fall, it begins to establish the off-ramp from the outset. Moreover, in working with community and family influences, it is more likely to support a reduction in violent extremism recidivism because of the long-term, ongoing, and intimate approach. Of course, programs of this type should be done parallel to intelligence-related operations and, if anything, can be used to inform each other to support a holistic approach to disengagement and deradicalization overall.

Conclusion: the trouble with deradicalization

The first consideration with deradicalization in the North American context is the difference in the way the two countries of America and Canada operate while handling this issue. At the state level, both countries are largely aligned through long-standing security, political, and economic treaties but there are marked cultural differences when it comes to the way these three issues are viewed by the public at large. The United States is engaged in major wars in the Middle East and Canada has supported all operations, including the 2003 Iraq War in which it did not join militarily as a country. This has resulted in politicization of radicalization and terrorism in both countries, ostensibly linked to the real fact that Muslim extremists are engaged as the enemy in these wars, the consequences of which have visited us all here at home.

Another marked difference is the legal system and its approaches to dealing with crime. The United States has a prison–industrial complex that is not the case in Canada. While judges are elected in the United States, they are appointed in Canada. The United States has two parallel and sovereign judicial systems. The U.S. federal justice system applies federal law, while the state systems are sovereign over the interpretation of state law. Canada has a unified system where all courts are parts of the same scheme. Systemic discrimination in the United States is greater than in Canada. These parts, taken together, especially the more liberal judicial philosophy in Canada, usually mean there will be no “counseling programs” that will mitigate or influence sentencing, which is usually set in decades when it comes to terrorism offenses. Individuals in Canada, even if sentenced to 20 years for terrorism offenses, may get out sooner and, even then, without any specific deradicalization programs.
made available to them while incarcerated. For all the research projects related to this topic, there is yet to be a specifically designed deradicalization program implemented and, at the moment, this remains a venture at its beginning stages.

An optimistic note related to Canada is that Muslim organizations generally have a positive relationship with government at large and are socially and politically active. Numerous professionals staff these organizations and have made clear their objections to any state-driven program that would focus only on the extremism of one group, and neglect others. Canada has been careful to frame countering extremism of any and all such groups and there are numerous non-governmental organizations and faith communities that network with each other, in order to make this a larger social issue and not just one related to terrorism.

On the practical front, the greatest challenge to deradicalization lies with what security services and law enforcement should do. These agencies are responsible for determining whom to investigate in order to stop potential attacks. Having been told that someone has been deradicalized and no longer poses a threat is not a sufficient reason to end or not start a case. Security intelligence and police organizations cannot afford to make decisions on priorities based on alleged deradicalization for fear that they are wrong. The public do not forgive errors by their protectors and do not want to hear that an act was carried out by an individual deemed to no longer be of interest. As no one can offer guarantees that treatment/care has worked, security services cannot use such criteria to determine workload and attention.

Here is also another point to consider: the separation of roles of responsibilities by government agencies and community organizations. Intelligence and/or police agencies will not cease surveillance of an individual just because s/he is seeking counseling. To err on the side of caution, they cannot risk the individual using such programs as a cover. In one Canadian case, an individual was under watch by the police, and was going to an imam, only to suddenly end up attacking two Canadian Forces members, killing one of them with his vehicle (MacCharles & Allan 2014). On the other hand, if an imam is thought to be feeding information to the authorities, parents and community members will not come forward with their children for counseling or anything else. Government-driven top-down programs will just not work in these settings and intelligence and police agencies have limited interest and ability to try to administer them where they focus on this one area of crime.

Perhaps we have the wrong focus when we elect to see deradicalization as a goal in light of the difficulties in determining whether success has been achieved. A related, but sometimes confused, term is disengagement. Those who have effectively disengaged have not necessarily deradicalized but have chosen to no longer act on their underlying ideology. Disengagement is overtly visible because it is based on observable behavior: one’s social circle, online browsing and postings. This is significantly different than deradicalization where underlying psychology, which is inherently less visible, is more difficult to measure.

Even with disengagement there are problems. Just as an allegedly deradicalized individual can “reradicalize” under the right (or wrong) circumstances, someone who has disengaged can “reengage” in terrorism under the right (or wrong) circumstances. If the underlying ideology is indeed present, such might facilitate a return to violent extremism. At best, disengagement is all we can hope for since it is the only phenomenon that is readily observable. This is not to suggest that deradicalization programs should not be supported or administered as it is likely that there are benefits, planned or otherwise.

Still, we are far from a world where we can take deradicalization claims as guarantees of non-threats and the authors agree that, as a natural process, there are many individuals who we can say have been deradicalized as they are now deeply involved with countering...
violence, be they ex-Islamists, gang members, neo-Nazis, and others. However, it is the deradicalization process manufactured in think tanks and universities, with limited research especially related to long-term implementation, which gives us reason to be cautious with programs claiming to have successfully changed the mind of an extremist in a short period of time.

Notes

4 Special thanks to Mustafa Allahrakha and Alejandro Beutel for their contribution to the Safe Spaces section.
8 For reference see https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20151028/104102/HHRG-114-HM05-Wstate-BjeloperaJ-20151028.pdf

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