DGAP REPORT

InFoEx Workshop, October 7–8, 2021

Issue Paper: Communicating in Tertiary Prevention of Islamist Extremism

by Sofia Koller

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR EXPERT EXCHANGE ON COUNTERING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM (INFOEX)

InFoEx is a joint project of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the Research Center for Migration, Integration and Asylum of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). InFoEx brings together good practices and scientific findings from tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism in Germany and abroad. The aim of the project is to compile empirical findings on radicalization and deradicalization processes with a focus on their practical applicability for prevention work. To this end, the BAMF Research Centre initiated a network called FoPraTEx which consists of research fellows embedded at local advice centers and research institutions partnering with the BAMF Advice Centre Radicalisation. Together with counselors working in these local advice centers, the FoPraTEx research fellows represent the core members of InFoEx.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP ON OCTOBER 7-8, 2021

The InFoEx workshop in October 2021 focused on communicating and cooperating in different contexts of tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism. The ongoing restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 made it necessary to organize the workshop in a virtual format. Among the almost 30 participants were network partners of the BAMF Advice Centre on Radicalisation from civil society and government institutions as well as practitioners and academics from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain. To align the workshop with the needs of its stakeholders, research fellows embedded at local advice centers and at research institutions in Germany (FoPraTEx) shared – in agreement with practitioners at their local advice centers – specific information needs and questions prior to the workshop. At the workshop, participants were able to share their experiences and views of the challenges and good practices when working with Muslim stakeholders and youth welfare offices in the context of prison and probation, (forced) migration, and under the conditions of the pandemic.

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Content

Executive Summary

Tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism includes measures designed to encourage and support (violent) extremists in prison and in liberty in their efforts to leave their milieus, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society. Actors in tertiary prevention thus intervene in a multitude of contexts and work with various stakeholders. The growing understanding of the complexity of radicalization and deradicalization processes as well as practical experiences leave no doubt that multi-agency cooperation and communication is crucial to be able to reach most potential clients. However, one of the main challenges of professionals working in tertiary prevention is to identify potential points of contact, set up effective frameworks for sharing information, and establish long term relationships.

To address these challenges, this issue paper presents the results of a workshop of the International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx) in October 2021. The workshop was organized by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in cooperation with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and its governmental and civil society network partners. Practitioners, researchers, and government officials from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain met online to discuss their experiences when communicating and cooperating in different contexts of tertiary prevention, based on their work with Muslim stakeholders, the prison and probation services, youth welfare offices, and exit and prevention workers counseling refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, they shared their experiences of working during a pandemic.

The findings lead to the following key recommendations for practitioners and policy makers in the field of tertiary prevention working with local communities, including Mosque associations and refugees, as well as with actors from the prison, probation, and youth welfare services:

Key Recommendations

1 Prevent stigmatization when working with local communities by ensuring sensitive, targeted communication, cooperation at eye level, and a profound understanding of local circumstances and the socio-historic background.

2 Strengthen existing relationships by reaching out to the community, for example when working with Mosque associations.

3 Develop both informal and formal networks to facilitate access to potentially radicalized individuals within local communities, including refugees and other foreign nationals.

4 Provide multi-professional and inter-institutional training to support clarity of roles and trust building, such as joint role plays for representatives of counseling services, security agencies, and youth welfare services.

5 Policy makers should consider adapting the legal framework for working with potentially radicalized convicts after their release from prison to make use of the experiences gained with other offenders.

Introduction

In the context of InFoEx, tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism is understood to mean all measures designed to encourage and support extremists in prison and in liberty in their efforts to leave their milieus, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society. To this end, actors in tertiary prevention need to intervene in a multitude of contexts and work with various stakeholders. The growing understanding of the complexity and the nuances of radicalization and deradicalization processes, underpinned by the wealth of experience gained over the past several years, points to a clear conclusion: Prevention is essentially a team effort.

To effectively reach and work with most potential clients, multi-agency cooperation and communication are essential. Examples include working with Muslim associations, Mosque communities, and youth welfare services in the context of prison and probation or (forced) migration. Also, the restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 have made it necessary to find new ways to cooperate and communicate. They have also demonstrated the limits of what can be achieved through digital exchanges.

As a consequence, some of the main challenges that professionals working in tertiary prevention face are to identify potential points of contact, set up effective cooperation and communication structures, and establish long term relationships.

This issue paper presents the results of an InFoEx workshop in October 2021. Practitioners, researchers, and government officials from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain came together to discuss their experiences when communicating and cooperating in different contexts of tertiary prevention. This included working with Muslim stakeholders, the prison and probation services, youth welfare offices, and exit and prevention workers counseling refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, participants shared their experiences of working during a pandemic. The following five chapters summarize the challenges they faced before highlighting some of the good practices proposed by workshop participants.[1]

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1   To avoid replication, this paper only includes new aspects which came up during the workshop. Challenges and good practices that were discussed at earlier events can be found in the previous InFoEx Issue Papers; see https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/security-and-defense-program/counter-terrorism-and-prevention-violent-extremism for a full list.

Working with Muslim Stakeholders

Whether to work with stakeholders in local Muslim communities, how to go about it, and which partners to choose – for example mosque communities or actors who are considered influential but do not hold a formal position – is a controversial topic among stakeholders in tertiary prevention. One of the main concerns was to avoid harming the reputation of potential partners within the Muslim communities. Such partners could potentially be stigmatized either if they were labelled as "extremists" or indeed if other members of the community believed that they were working too closely with state institutions. Several participants said that a counseling center on deradicalization would therefore not easily take the decision to seek direct cooperation with Muslim actors.

There was also some doubt about the usefulness of cooperating with specific mosque communities since people who were vulnerable to radicalization might not always be attending the same mosque. Another challenge was identifying the right point of contact. In Germany, for example, mosque communities often relied on volunteers instead of fully qualified theologists. In Denmark, prevention actors from the Aarhus model faced similar challenges: To keep young Somalis from joining al-Shabaab in Somalia, they reached out to Somali mosques and a local umbrella association. However, they had to set up several separate meetings to be able to meet all the relevant actors. Finally, it was also mentioned that it was difficult to decide whether a mosque could be considered an 'appropriate partner' and did not propagate (violent) extremism. A German researcher stressed that a display of Salafi books in a mosque did not necessarily mean that the whole community adhered to Salafism. However, prevention workers often had trouble understanding the funding structures behind a mosque.

The following good practices were identified by participants to address these and other challenges:

• **Know your local (religious) community:** In general, it was considered important to have a good understanding of the local mosques, their leadership, and the politics behind them. Equally, one should be informed of the community frequenting the mosque and its other associations and informal networks. Such an insight into the community lent credibility and made it easier to identify interlocutors with influence in their community or to recognize challenging actors with differing views. Mutual trust and knowledge about each other was created, for example, in the "Cooperation Network – Safe Coexistence (KoSiZu)". Here, the BAMF brought German security authorities and Muslim actors into dialogue with each other and created "dialogue platforms" on specific local issues.

• **Identify a concrete reason to start a dialogue and find a common objective:** Since some practitioners fear that Muslim communities might face stigmatization, offering a concrete reason to start a dialogue or partnership was considered more helpful than speaking about an abstract danger. In Denmark, the fact that young men were leaving to join Jihadist organizations abroad provided prevention workers from the Aarhus model with an important reason to engage with the relevant communities. For example, a press release mentioned that a vast majority of those who had travelled to Syria in 2013 had been frequenting the same mosque in Aarhus. The Aarhus team used the imminent public communication to approach the mosque: "We gave them the choice of either being part of the solution or part of the problem. Being part of the solution meant talking to us." A dialogue started, and eventually, the mosque itself decided to adapt the tone of the Friday prayers to keep young people from leaving. Similarly, a Danish participant shared his experience that in Somali communities, many mothers were very concerned that their children might decide to go to Somalia. The team used this concern to mobilize the community, help its members acknowledge the problem, and work together to keep more young men from leaving.

• **Reach out before an incident occurs:** Other actors explained that they had good experiences with approaching Muslim communities early on to build trust before an incident happened. According to a German researcher, representatives of a German counseling center regularly visited Muslim communities to establish relationships of trust.

• **Focus on "real problems" and avoid religious discussions:** A practitioner stressed the importance of not talking about religion with Muslim actors. Instead, he and his colleagues focused on the "real problem" of young peo

ple without (military) experience going into a dangerous conflict zone from where they might return injured and traumatized.

• **Utilize several approaches:** Several participants agreed that it was important to work both bottom-up and top-down and complement official offers of dialogue and cooperation with the use of informal networks. It was considered helpful to have a good relationship with a leader in a community or mosque, such as an imam. Ideally, this would lead to a formal collaboration with the mosque to have both "systems working together." At the same time, participants recommended finding out about informal groups and networks, for example associations of mothers, and reaching out to them. Finally, non-affiliated persons of influence could also help to establish a more formal collaboration.

• **Maintain the relationship:** Once a contact was established, it was considered important to nurture the relationship. This could include community outreach initiatives or occasional visits. It was also considered helpful to inform actors about changes in legislation that might affect them. For example, Denmark made it illegal in 2016 to travel to a conflict zone. Actors from the Muslim community ended up calling the Aarhus team when they spotted radicalized youth who were preparing to leave Denmark.

Working during and after prison

Almost all European countries have established a probation system, though these vary according to the respective cultural and legal background.[2] In EU member states, probation usually refers to the courts ordering a suspension of the sentence and supervision by a probationary service instead of sending a convicted person to prison, for example if the custodial sentence is for less than two years. The court can also agree to conditional release after the convict has served a predetermined part of his or her sentence. This is possible if the conviction is considered to constitute a sufficient warning, or if it can be assumed that the convict will not reoffend.

In this context, data protection laws can lead to unintended consequences. In Germany, a court can set specific conditions and instructions when releasing an inmate on probation. These can include obligations to inform the authorities about any change in residence or to participate in an alcohol or drug therapy. The probation staff is kept informed about any such conditions. In the case of inmates who had been radicalized or who were convicted for terrorism offenses, the courts sometimes require participation in an exit program. According to a probation officer, there are cases in which the released inmate takes part in an exit program, but where the court has not made this part of the terms of probation that were communicated to the probation officers. As a result, exit counselors are not allowed to communicate with the probation staff because of the protection of personal data. An effective cooperation would then only be possible if the client decided to voluntarily share his participation in the exit program with his probation officer. A civil society practitioner said that nevertheless, data protection regulations continued to be very important.

Several participants pointed out that prisons were short of risk assessment tools that take a gender perspective into account. While the overall number of possibly radicalized female inmates in the prisons was still relatively low, more women were being prosecuted and sentenced to prison. Women faced specific challenges in reintegration after a prison sentence.

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2   The Confederation of European Probation provides information about national legislation and regimes in each country (CEP nd). In Germany, Paragraph 56 of the penal code (StGB) regulates the suspension of sentences.

The following good practices were identified by participants to address these challenges:

- **Gain access to potential clients:** For instance in Germany, some penitentiary institutions employ so-called structural observers: one or two prison officials, who are charged with observing the phenomena of Islamist extremism and look for negative group building as well as radicalization tendencies within the institution. They report their findings to the prison management and the prison unit in charge of supporting the inmates' social rehabilitation, which in turn shares information with the probationary service. This was considered very helpful for identifying potential clients.

- **Observe the principle of voluntary participation:** Several participants said participation in exit counseling should not be made mandatory as part of the probationary terms. On the contrary: To be able to establish trust, clients needed to agree to participate on a voluntary basis.

- **Establish clarity of roles:** According to a German probation officer, it was helpful for probation services and exit counselors to discuss their responsibilities early on. Probation officers found it very useful to receive advice from exit counselors on detecting radicalization tendencies and to share insights into (anonymized) cases.

- **Digitalize information sharing:** A penitentiary institution and probation services in the German state of Baden-Württemberg are currently developing a new method to improve information sharing: The objective is to create a link between the probation service's software and the prison's software to allow early access to information. While this had not been sufficiently tested yet to be considered a good practice, it was mentioned as a promising approach.

- **Adapt legal frameworks:** Participants also discussed whether the framework for information sharing on possibly radicalized convicts could be adapted based on experiences gained in other fields. In a German state, sex offenders, for example, after being released from prison were put in touch with a forensic prevention outpatient clinic to receive support on mental health issues relating to their offense. This could make it easier to implement judicial (therapeutic) orders and help to reduce recidivism. During the supervision, staff could share information with probation officers without needing their client's permission. However, this was not possible for inmates on conditional release.

MORE LIGHT THAN SHADOW

During the workshop, a participant reported from the project „More Light than Shadow", which is part of the prevention project re:vision of the German NGO IFAK in North Rhine-Westphalia. It provides informal and methods-based support to inmates to encourage them to develop their own strategy for a crime-free life (IFAK 2020). Over the course of three months, the participants – in the age group between 18 and 30 – meet once a week to focus on political education and topics like identity, democracy, and faith. They are also familiarized with methods aimed at strengthening their personal and social competences. Participants are invited to express their opinions, thoughts, and feelings behind a baffle wall. What they present is recorded so that they feel as if somebody listens to them. The final recording of their views is screened in the prison.

Working with youth welfare services

The cooperation between prevention actors such as counseling centers and youth welfare services has intensified over the past several years, which leads to new challenges. Of course, the latter still have to deal with cases of youth becoming radicalized to go "against the family" or minors growing up in Salafist or Jihadist families. But the surge in returnee cases after the military defeat of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), one practitioner said, had led to child and youth welfare offices becoming much more involved in prevention work.

The first new challenge therefore related to the difficult question of how to counsel and reintegrate returnees. At the same time, the concern that returned children might have been indoctrinated by ISIS contributed to feelings of uncertainty on the part of youth welfare staff. Cooperation between these actors was important, but their mandates, roles, perspectives, and objectives differed. Second, the pandemic situation due to COVID-19 had reduced the number of case-unrelated contacts. There were fewer workshops, and online formats were no real substitute for real-life exchange. Collaboration on specific cases was going well, but general cooperation was seen to be more problematic. The third aspect that participants pointed out was the heightened awareness of the role and the expertise of youth welfare in Germany. For example, there were more projects funded to strengthen statutory bodies[3]. However, case meetings often left little time to discuss roles and objectives, and there was still a lack of tailor-made formats for specific local cooperation needs.

The following good practice was identified by participants to address these and other challenges and developments.

• **Provide inter-institutional training to support clarity of roles and trust building:** Participants from France and Germany agreed that it was crucial to invest enough time in understanding and negotiating mandates, roles, and objectives. A good practice was reported from Germany, where the "Clearingstelle Radikalisierungsprävention," a Hamburg-based pilot project active in the prevention of radicalization had developed a role play to train child and youth welfare professionals, security officials, and counselors to understand each other's perspective concerning case management. Participants in this pilot project were asked to handle a fictional but realistic returnee case from different perspectives: security officer, counselor, youth welfare officer, or employee of a civil society providing educational support. Participants were asked to adopt roles which differed from their normal work routine. A counselor, for example, would be playing the role of a policewoman. Through the experience of a very different role, participants gained insights into the different institutions' mandates. They also learnt about who was putting pressure on whom during a case conference, and how they were doing it themselves. Finally, they practiced arriving at a solution together despite the pressure.

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3   Statutory bodies are institutions established by law with the legal authority to take action in a certain area and provide permanent support to citizens in a specific sector. Examples of statutory bodies or partners in the field of tertiary prevention are the education and health services, social services, children's and youth welfare services, and offender management services.

Working in the context of (forced) migration

Actors in tertiary prevention sometimes have clients who do not have the nationality of the country they are residing in. These include legal immigrants, recognized refugees, asylum applicants, or tolerated foreigners. What happens to potentially radicalized persons from this group is a highly political topic to which the public reacts very sensitively. This presents specific challenges for prevention actors. One difficulty highlighted at the workshop concerned getting access to the target group and finding out about relevant cases. Participants also stressed that it was crucial to prevent stigmatization and not work on migration and integration issues solely from the perspective of preventing extremism. Further challenges could arise regarding the cooperation between prevention actors and immigration authorities as well as the laws concerning foreigners. For example, former convicts might not be able to apply for work permits.

The following good practices were identified by participants to address these and other challenges:

• **Build on informal connections to get access to potential clients:** A Belgian practitioner said that as he had worked in a refugee home before joining a civil society counseling center on deradicalization and disengagement, he was able to build on his earlier contacts. Another possibility was to establish relationships with community leaders who could help "build bridges" between their community and the relevant agencies and NGOs. When approaching potential contacts, it was helpful to reflect on the best use of language, for example saying "large families" instead of "clan".

• **Establish formal exchange formats and communicate about your work:** When a new counseling center was established in Belgium, the team started out by establishing working relationships with the justice system (prosecutors, judges) but also with police and psychosocial care providers to explain the counseling center's work and mission. It may also be useful to contact the juvenile court judges, who in some cases can give counseling centers a mandate to work with clients who are registered for an offense. Another good practice from Belgium were the local integrated security cells (LIVC-R or CSIL-R), where prevention officials, security agencies, psycho-social care providers, and other relevant actors from the municipality meet regularly to discuss possible cases of radicalization (see also Koller 2021). These meetings also offered an opportunity to work towards preventing stigmatization in migrant communities.

• **Develop exchange formats to promote socio-historic understanding:** Participants also considered it helpful to develop exchange formats with social workers or educators to discuss the socio-historic background of local communities, such as a possible history of marginalization and exclusion in both the country of origin and the country of residence. If the family or community was held responsible for the actions of a small group, there might also be a perception of unfair treatment. While this could obviously neither legitimize the use of violence nor serve as the only explanation of a radicalization process, it could help the understanding of certain behavioral patterns.

• **Focus on aspects such as mental health instead of religion.** In the past, prevention work often concentrated on religious beliefs as a risk or protective factor in radicalization processes. This focus could lead to a stigmatization of certain communities. To avoid this, a wider spectrum of risk and protective factors would now be now considered, for example psychological aspects such as experiences and behavior in the context of radicalization or mental health issues.

Working during a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had an important impact on cooperation and communication in the field of tertiary prevention. Participants reported several challenges: According to a Belgium exit counselor, the crisis aggravated the preexisting psychosocial fragilities of some clients. At the same time, communication became more difficult. While it eventually became possible to discuss cases with governmental agencies thanks to software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, talking to one's clients remained difficult because they often lacked adequate technical equipment. Preparing inmates for their release also became more challenging, since personal meetings in prison had to be replaced by phone calls or e-mail messages. In addition, it was more difficult to establish a risk prognosis as part of a supervision of conduct since participants had to exchange opinions via email instead of holding case conferences. As of autumn 2021, the situation had somewhat normalized, and real-life meetings often become possible again.

Meanwhile, the following good practices were identified by participants:

• **Use secure communication software:** In one German state, for example, the probation service is now connected to the state's data network and can use Skype for Business for virtual meetings with clients.

• **Use innovative training formats:** That same probation service is currently working on strengthening cooperation with a local exit program. In 2021, it organized a hybrid training with exit counselors where the content was presented digitally.

Conclusion

In tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism, civil society and governmental actors work in a variety of contexts. They not only have to deal with different target groups but also need to cooperate with different actors. Cooperation and communication are further complicated by historic developments on a global level such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the principles of successful cooperation and communication remain the same: Effective case management – whether in dealing with youth welfare services or Muslim stakeholders, in the context of prison and probation, or (forced) migration – depends on clarity of roles, the ability to establish trust, and a focus on common objectives.

Discussions at the workshop yielded another clear result: It is essential to prevent stigmatization and understand the socio-historic background, especially when working with local communities. Only then is it possible to build the lasting and trusting relationships that are of paramount importance to effective prevention work. Both formal and informal networks are also crucial to facilitate access to potential target groups.

Since 2019, information exchange and direct contacts have been limited due to COVID-19. While the pandemic arguably encouraged actors to try out more innovative formats and digitalize their cooperation as far as possible, building personal relationships and cultivating the ability to change perspectives and understand other actors' roles still very much depends on continuous real-life exchanges. Independently of COVID-19, many of the difficulties that participants reported appear to have persisted over the past years or even decades, for example regarding restrictions on the exchange of information or a lack of resources. Where practitioners depend on legal frameworks for their work, policy makers may need to change legislation to help improve cooperation and communication in tertiary prevention.

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