

DGAP POLICY BRIEF

Towards More Effective Deradicalization

Urgent Recommendations for Addressing Violent Islamist Extremism



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Violent Islamist extremism is still one of the biggest threats to internal security as well as societal cohesion in the EU. As a crucial part of any comprehensive counterstrategy, tertiary prevention encompasses measures designed to encourage and support (violent) extremists in prison and in society to leave their milieus, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society. However, 'exit work' is becoming increasingly complex: The profiles of radicalizing individuals are becoming more diverse; an ever-larger number of governmental and civil society actors must work together; and the effectiveness of any measure must be clearly demonstrated. Global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing importance of the online dimension, and the blurring of internal and external security make for additional pressure.

National governments and international bodies must be aware of key trends to ensure an effective and sustainable prevention policy.

- Prevention actors need to prepare for a wider range of potentially radicalized individuals, including not just men but also women and youth.
- Closer cooperation between different actors and across professions is crucial and requires trust building and mechanisms for exchanging information.
- Effectiveness has a price: Sustainable exit work and the prevention of recidivism are only possible if prevention work receives long-term funding, including for monitoring and evaluation, to identify the most effective responses.

RETHINKING TERTIARY PREVENTION

This policy brief provides a comprehensive overview of trends in tertiary prevention in Germany and other European countries as well as recommendations for policy actions. It is based on the findings of the International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx), a joint project of the DGAP and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) from 2018 to 2021¹. InFoEx brought together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers from more than twelve countries in a unique format to discuss challenges and good practices. The main findings are 1) that European countries are mostly faced with the same or similar issues and 2) that these trends must be addressed jointly, effectively combining practice, research, and policy.

Tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism refers to all measures designed to support and encourage (violent) extremists in prison and in society (in their efforts) to leave their milieu, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society.

A MANY-FACETED CHALLENGE

The growing number of female clients

The realization that more than 15 percent of Western Europeans who joined the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq were women has focused attention on gender issues and the role of women in extremist structures.² Radicalization and deradicalization processes of women are already better understood, and the funding and design of exit projects have started to acknowledge the importance of taking gender aspects into account.³ Yet even more sensitivity is needed.

Mechanisms of recruitment, retention, and mobilization are similar for men and women. But extremist organizations tend to target women with narratives around motherhood or emancipation from Western social expectations and recruit them through online platforms like chat groups rather than in public spaces. In the meantime, practitioners are also concerned about an increasing tendency towards radicalization among girls barely into their teenage years.

Women, including female returnees, are less likely to receive a prison sentence than men. This can make prevention work more difficult: According to practitioners, gaining access to female clients outside of prison is often particularly challenging. But even if women do get sentenced to prison, prison staff and prevention actors reportedly have less experience working with potentially radicalized female inmates than with men. After their release, female convicts tend to have higher unemployment rates and are usually the ones dealing with child custody issues.⁴ Former female extremists also face greater stigma, making their reintegration into society even harder.

More cases of (returning) minors⁵

In addition to a significant number of women having joined Jihadist organizations, more than 1,400 minors were either taken by their Western European parents to Syria and Iraq or born there.⁶ It is true that prevention workers have experience working with minors growing up in Salafist families.⁷ Knowledge is also available about children raised by extremist parents or youth engaged in radicalization. However, returning minors pose new challenges.

Under the influence of the IS, children were often indoctrinated from a young age. Especially boys may have received weapons training and engaged in violent behavior. Also, returning mothers in some cases lose custody of their children, for example during pre-trial detention. Most prisons do not have enough mother-child facilities or lack the personnel needed to accompany the children to regular

1 The project received funding by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (BMI) from the National Prevention Programme (NPP).

2 Cook, Joana & Vale, Gina: "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II. The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 12(6), 2019, p.36; see for example Sjöberg 2018, Cook & Vale 2018, Pearson & Winterbotham 2017.

3 RAN: "Gender-specific approaches in exit work," Ex Post Paper, Radicalisation Awareness Network, November 28, 2019.

4 RAN: "Gender-specific approaches in exit work," Ex Post Paper, Radicalisation Awareness Network, November 28, 2019.

5 Koller, Sofia: "Dealing with Women and Minors in Tertiary Prevention," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, November 2021 (upcoming).

6 Cook & Vale 2019, p.36.

7 RAN: "Children growing up in extremist families," Ex Post Paper, Radicalisation Awareness Network, April 2019; Weine, S., Brahmabatt, Z., Cardeli, E., Ellis, H.: "Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State," Annals of Global Health, Vol.86(1), 2020, pp.1-15.

visits. Being separated from one's reference person can retraumatize returned minors and aggravate existing instabilities. For such children, specific mental health expertise is needed, for example on trauma, which is often not available. A multidisciplinary review of psychological and social profiles of European youth who have engaged in radicalization suggests that, among other elements, individual risk factors include early experiences of abandonment and micro-environmental risk factors such as family dysfunction.⁸

A multi-dimensional challenge

Prevention work is also becoming increasingly multi-dimensional as international and technological developments add to the complexity of working within the limits of national institutions and borders. Of the more than 5,000 people who left Western Europe after 2012 to join IS and other Jihadist organizations, about one third have returned.⁹ Given the difficulty of obtaining evidence from a distant combat zone, the prosecution of these returnees is challenging, and some may receive only a short prison sentence or none at all. In these cases, exit workers have little or no time to engage with potential clients in prison and to build a relationship which could facilitate the returnees' rehabilitation and reintegration. With more people still waiting to return, these issues will stay on the agenda for the coming years.

At the same time, both research and practical experiences have highlighted the important role that the internet can play in radicalization processes: "A significant part of the radicalization [of lone actors in the past years] had taken part online,"¹⁰ said Peter Neumann, Professor of Security Studies at King's College London.

A TEAM EFFORT

Cooperation remains challenging

The complexity and nonlinearity of deradicalization and disengagement processes, particularly in cases which involve returned minors, mean that effective prevention work requires interagency cooperation.¹¹ This applies not only to exit programs for radicalized individuals or to security agencies but a variety of actors from the social, educational, justice, and public health sector which help clients find employment, especially after being released from prison, or get access to health services.

There is a clear trend towards more multi-agency cooperation. But conflicting roles, unclear responsibilities, difficulties in sharing information, or lack of experience with this type of client are only some of the challenges that need to be addressed in this context.

The relevance of mental health issues¹²

No immediate causal connection has been established between mental illness and extremism, but experts largely agree that "extremist groups have attracted significantly more people with mental health issues" in recent years.¹³ Studies also suggest that lone-actor terrorists are more likely to suffer from a mental illness than group-based terrorists, and recent attacks in Europe confirm this finding.¹⁴ However, researchers argue that practitioners should not only consider whether the person has a mental health issue or not, but also find out whether mental health problems are relevant to the individual's radicalization process.¹⁵

Tertiary prevention therefore needs to be able to address mental health issues to support an individual's disengagement from extremism. But mental health is not only about confirmed and current diagnoses, but also about potential vulnerability and subclinical cases.¹⁶ Mental health issues can range from depression to severe pathologies such as per-

8 Campelo, Oppetit, Neau, Cohen & Bronsard: "Who are the European youths willing to engage in radicalization? A multidisciplinary review of their psychological and social profiles," *European Psychiatry* 52, August 2018, pp. 1–14.

9 Renard, T. & Coolsaet, R. (Eds): "Returnees. Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands," Egmont Papers, February 2018.

10 Neumann, Peter: "Tertiary Prevention. What providers urgently need to change," November 4, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=06y8IAZU9zg

11 See also Koller, Sofia: "Cooperation in Tertiary Prevention of Islamist Extremism," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, 2021.

12 See also Koller, Sofia: "Psychological Factors and Mental Health Issues in Tertiary Prevention," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, December 2019.

13 Neumann, Peter: "Tertiary Prevention. What providers urgently need to change," November 4, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=06y8IAZU9zg

14 Corner, Emily & Gill, Paul: "A false dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism," *Law and Human Behavior* 2015, Vol.39, No.1, p.30.

15 Koller 2019, p.6.

16 RAN: "RAN Policy & Practice: A mental health approach to understanding violent extremism," Ex Post Paper, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2019.

sonality disorder or schizophrenia.¹⁷ Exit workers are not necessarily trained to detect or address potential mental health issues, while psychotherapists and psychologist often have long waiting lists.

Involving local communities

As part of the trend towards more cooperation, there is also more awareness of the necessity to engage with local stakeholders, for example Muslim associations and migrant communities. Disengagement and reintegration into society is clearly a team effort, but how to organize relations with different partners can be a difficult or even controversial topic. One of the main challenges for those working in tertiary prevention is to identify potential points of contact, set up effective frameworks for sharing information, and establish long term relationships. In addition, practitioners are concerned that 'securitizing' community outreach and cooperation could lead to stigmatization. Another challenge for policy makers and practitioners evolves around the question of whether and how to deal with Islamist actors across the spectrum from non-violent to violent extremism.

MAKING PREVENTION SUSTAINABLE

Assess risk and prevent recidivism

Europol warns that "the bulk of the currently incarcerated jihadist offender population [in EU countries] will be released by 2023."¹⁸ Several violent attacks in the past years involved recently released offenders who had been in contact with exit programs. This raises the question of how to accurately assess potential risks and how to prevent or at least significantly reduce the risk of recidivism.¹⁹ While for Islamist extremists, recidivism rates are relatively low compared to average offenders, the time just after a prisoner's release is often considered the critical phase and crucial for preventing recidivism.²⁰ To gauge the risk that potential extremists represent, a growing number of risk assessment tools has been

developed over the past decade, including VERA2R, ERG22+, TRAP-18 or Radar-iTE. However, these tools have been criticized for having low evidence and base rates, not focusing sufficiently on protective factors, or not being gender or age sensitive. There is a growing need to not only effectively assess potential security risks but also identify protective factors to help prevent recidivism.

Find out what's most effective and fund it²¹

More countries are now focusing on the prevention of extremism in addition to repressive measures to counter terrorism. As considerable amounts of funding are spent on tertiary prevention, there is a growing understanding that actors need to be able to identify successful measures and demonstrate how they work.

Yet it has also become apparent that it is very difficult – or even impossible – to measure efforts to support individuals who wish to leave violent extremism behind. Ethical and practical questions complicate the monitoring and evaluation of exit work: Disengagement processes can take several years and thus exceed average funding cycles, which makes it difficult to track changes that occur over time and measure the long-term impact. In addition, many factors can influence these processes, and in the absence of control groups, it is not always possible to clearly identify the effects caused by a specific measure. Another debate evolves around the question of what constitutes success and how to measure it. Finally, evaluations show that it can be difficult to access data on clients' development.²² Overall, evaluations are a key aspect to making prevention work more effective and sustainable.

Fostering exchanges between research and practice²³

There is a growing wealth of academic research on deradicalization and disengagement processes and prevention work. However, this is still a rather new area of research, and there are few studies that hold up to rigorous scientific standards, for example

17 Corner, Gill & Mason: "Mental Health Disorders and the Terrorist: A Research Note Probing Selection Effects and Disorder Prevalence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39(6) (January 2016), pp. 560–568.

18 Europol: "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020", Europol, 2020, p.4.

19 See also Koller, S.: "Good Practices in Risk Assessment for Terrorist Offenders," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, February 2021 and Koller, S.: "Preventing Recidivism of Islamist Extremists," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, June 2021.





20 See for example Renard, Thomas: "Overblown. Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 4, April 2020, pp.19 – 29. *Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 4, April 2020, pp.19 – 29.

21 See also Koller, S.: "Good Practices in Evaluating Tertiary PVE Programs," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, April 2020.

22 Van der Heide, L. & Schuurman, B.: "Reintegrating Terrorists in the Netherlands. Evaluating the Dutch approach," *Journal for Deradicalization*, 2018, No.17, p.225f.

23 More information in BAMF: "Schnitt:Stellen," Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, forthcoming, 2022.

1 – MANAGEMENT OF EXTREMIST OFFENDERS

	Number of prisoners in custody for terrorism-related offences	Number of prisoners monitored for radicalization	Placement regime	Primary risk assessment tool used	Deradicalization or disengagement approaches specific to extremist offenders
	136 in total	160	Dispersal (with select concentration)	VERA-2R	Individual disengagement programs
	157 Islamist extremists	ca. 450	Dispersal (with select concentration)	ERG 22+	'Healthy Identity Intervention' (HII); 'Desistance and Disengagement Programme' (DDP)
	454 in total	1,102	Dispersal (with select concentration)	'Radicalisation assessment grid', VERA-2R	Individual program; group workshops;
	Unspecified	ca. 292	Dispersal	VERA-2R; RADAR-iTE	Programs vary from state to state, as funded by the 'Demokratie Leben!' initiative, with different ideological, pastoral, and socio-educational emphases

Source: Own graphic, based on Basra & Neumann 2020²⁴, Chambre des Représentants de Belgique 2020²⁵, Allen & Harding 2021²⁶, LCI 2021²⁷, Said 2020²⁸.

on the use of primary sources or the inclusion of authors from different disciplines. In addition, social workers may simply not have the time to read long and complex articles in English, which may not be their mother tongue, or they may lack access to specialized journals. Practitioners and policy makers are generally interested in the latest research but often find it difficult to integrate those findings into their daily work or concrete policy. These challenges will have to be addressed: To make prevention work more effective over time, it is indispensable to translate research findings into practice while at the same time having practical experiences inform future research.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Upgrade prevention work

Tertiary prevention programs and measures need to pay more attention to gender and age. For example,

penitentiary institutions must facilitate regular contact between imprisoned parents – women, but also men – and their children. Actors such as youth welfare offices need additional training and resources to develop expertise on the prevention of extremism. Procedures that have an impact on children, for example pre-trial detention or decisions about child custody, need to be sped up. While smaller children who return from combat zones or camps reportedly are often able to adapt and integrate quite well, trauma is a dynamic process. Long-term protective factors, especially for adolescents in puberty, need to be strengthened. Finally, practitioners need support and new formats to be able to stay on top of current online and offline trends, such as the existence of Salafist “hot spots,” especially in the local community of released terrorist offenders.

Smoothen access and facilitate cooperation

Tertiary prevention also needs to be conceptualized as a team effort. Policy makers should create

²⁴ Basra, Rajan & Neumann, Peter: “Prisons and Terrorism. Extremist Offender Management in 10 European Countries,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2020.

²⁵ Chambre des Représentants de Belgique: “Questions et réponses écrites,” September, 9, 2020.

²⁶ Allen, Grahame & Harding, Megan: “Terrorism in Great Britain. the statistics,” House of Commons Library, October, 14, 2021.

²⁷ LCI: “La France dénombre ‘648 détenus radicalisés’ dans ses prisons, affirme Éric Dupond-Moretti,” September, 8, 2021.

²⁸ Benham, Said: “Extremist Offender Management in Germany,” in Basra & Neumann 2020, pp.39-50.

2 – NETWORK OF ADVICE CENTERS OF THE BAMF ADVICE CENTRE “RADICALISATION”



Source: Own graphic, based on information from the BAMF Research Centre 2021

a legislative framework that facilitates partnership and information sharing.²⁹ Prevention policy should include formats that strengthen trust in public

institutions, especially among the relevant minorities. Trust-building exercises are also needed to strengthen cooperation between practitioners from

29 Koller, Sofia: "Cooperation in Tertiary Prevention of Islamist Extremism," Report, German Council on Foreign Relations, September 2021, p.14

different agencies and organizations. Exit workers should be enabled to move towards a culture of learning from mistakes and, for example, develop joint guidelines. Practitioners in both governmental and civil society organizations need to ensure that clients receive access to psychologists and psychotherapists. At the same time, they must also train their own staff to detect mental health issues such as trauma.³⁰ Local and national networks should be set up to ensure access to specific expertise in tertiary prevention, concerning for example mental health, child protection, or data protection issues. Finally, it would be a mistake to address migration and integration topics only from the perspective of preventing extremism.

Make prevention work more effective and sustainable

Tertiary prevention needs to include measures to become more effective and sustainable. To improve risk assessment and management, joint trainings need to be offered to actors who work together on concrete cases, for example during a client's time in and after prison. Both governmental and civil society practitioners should be allowed to use the time that offenders spend in penitentiary institutions to establish contact with potential clients and identify their individual needs and challenges. In addition, offender management needs to be streamlined to reduce the number of handovers between different actors. Monitoring and evaluation components – as well as adequate resources for them – need to be integrated when programs and projects are conceptualized and implemented. Participatory and for-

mative evaluation designs in particular help to take different perspectives into account and adapt ongoing projects. It is also crucial to prolong the funding cycles to several years, not only to help build relationships of trust with clients and among actors, but also to enable evaluators to include a delayed second round of interviews.

Over the coming years, the growing experience with monitoring and evaluations should make it possible to assess the effectiveness of tertiary prevention measures much more accurately. Ideally, researchers should be embedded in practitioner organizations such as advice centers or the prison and probation services to analyze and thus help improve their work. For example, more knowledge on why some individuals reengage with extremism and re-offend, while others do not, can help avoid unnecessary restrictive measures. Formats like work shadowing will also help foster the exchange of knowledge between research and practice and enable evidence-based policy.

Any sustainable prevention policy needs to be able to adapt to changing profiles, ensure effective cooperation, and fund the most effective measures. But to really stay on top of future trends and developments, forward-looking and independent research on a national level is required: A 'Foresight Commission' should be set up, bringing together representatives from research institutions and practitioners to analyze international and national as well as online and offline trends in violent extremism and recommend relevant policy measures.³¹

30 RAN: "PTSD, trauma, stress and the risk of (re)turning to violence," Ex Post Paper, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018.

31 Koller, Sofia; Hess, Miriam; Ritzmann, Alexander: "Gewaltorientierter Extremismus. Deutschland braucht eine nachhaltige Präventionspolitik," DGAP Memo, German Council on Foreign Relations, October 2021.



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DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.

Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 2198-5936

Editing Bettina Vestring

Layout Anna-Maria Roch

Design Concept WeDo

Author picture © DGAP



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