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TECHNICAL
REPORT

Individual disengagement from Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups

A Rapid Evidence Assessment to inform policy and practice in preventing terrorism

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Prepared for the
Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, UK Home Office

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Summary

In order to inform policy and practice in relation to preventing terrorism in the UK, the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) in the UK Home Office commissioned a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) of the available literature on the factors associated with leaving terrorist groups, and the effectiveness of interventions that might encourage individuals to leave such groups.

As agreed with the Home Office OSCT, this REA focuses upon terrorism which arises from the Al Qa'ida ideology or Al Qa'ida affiliates' ideology. In this REA the term 'terrorist group' is used to refer to these particular groups.

Due to the fact that there is very little research on leaving such terrorist groups, the OSCT also commissioned a second REA of the factors involved in leaving other groups, in the hope of identifying potentially transferable lessons. These other groups, selected by the OSCT, were street gangs, religious cults, right-wing extremist groups and organised crime groups.

Findings from the Rapid Evidence Assessment into factors associated with leaving Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups

A summary of the outcomes and findings of the first REA is as follows.

The available evidence provides a limited basis for policy development. There are too few studies that look at leaving terrorist groups, and a very limited number that look at leaving Al Qa'ida-influenced groups. The studies that have interviewed individuals who have left terrorist groups are useful starting points, but they provide an insufficient basis for isolating the factors that caused, or were strongly associated with, an individual's decision to leave.

The limited evidence base stems from the practical and methodological difficulties of conducting research on members and former members of terrorist groups. Such individuals are difficult, if not impossible to identify, and there are considerable risks involved in interacting with them. Those who do come forward to take part in research might be quite different from other current and former members.

In the limited evidence base, disillusionment is a commonly cited reason for disengagement from all kinds of terrorist groups. Reportedly, individuals can be disillusioned with the way that the group operates, the ideology of the group, the behaviour of the leader or the rules of the group.

Ties to family and friends outside the group and changing personal priorities may be associated with the process of disengagement from terrorist groups. However, while social bonds to family outside the group can act as 'pull' factors to exit, group membership is commonly built upon family and friendship ties that are a barrier to exit – thereby reinforcing continued membership. The available evidence suggests that the role of social ties and family commitments differs between individuals and, further, does not allow the REA to draw conclusions as to the relationship (if any) between disillusionment, social ties and changing priorities. For example, it could be that feeling disillusioned might lead an individual to rebuild relationships with family.

Changing roles within a terrorist organisation is cited in the available literature as a factor that might be associated with exit from Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups. However, a change in roles might be the result, rather than the cause, of a decision to exit.

While there are many descriptions of de-radicalisation interventions, the REA identified no published robust evaluations of their effectiveness. However, authors and researchers working in this field have identified a number of features, which they believe constitute 'best practice' in de-radicalisation interventions. In the absence of more robust evaluative evidence, these expert opinions provide a starting point for policymakers. The best practice includes:

- focusing on both ideology and behaviour;
- engaging on matters of religion and theology, by involving clerics or imams who have credibility with programme participants and with whom individuals can build a relationship;
- tailoring interventions to different kinds of terrorist groups – including the group's beliefs, practices and the political context in which they operate;
- attempting to limit isolation of the individual, preferably through family involvement; and
- providing financial incentives and support to individual members and their families.

Findings from the Rapid Evidence Assessment into factors associated with leaving street gangs, religious cults, right-wing extremist groups and organised crime groups

A summary of the outcomes and findings of the second REA is as follows.

The evidence base on the factors involved in exit from street gangs, religious cults and right-wing extremist groups is slightly more robust than that on leaving Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups. While this evidence base has limitations some 'promising practices' can be identified, which are potentially transferable to terrorist groups. There is little evidence to inform assessments of transferability of lessons from street gangs, religious cults and right-wing groups to terrorist groups. This REA is cautious about claiming transferability, but lessons from these other groups may be viewed as potentially promising practices.

The sources on leaving street gangs, religious cults and right-wing extremist groups suggest that the following are associated with exit from those groups. As such, they might play some role in the process of exit from Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups.

- Ties to family and friends outside the group can act as a 'pull' factor to leaving the group, or assist in the process of leaving once the individual has made a decision to exit. However, the picture is complicated, because individuals commonly have strong ties to other group members, which can encourage continued membership. Individuals must be viewed within the context of their particular relationships.
- There is evidence that individuals may simply 'grow out' of membership of street gangs, religious cults and right-wing groups, as they mature and/or their priorities change. Some people may experience shifting priorities and behaviours as they age, and this in itself may facilitate detachment or a gradual drift away from the group.
- Employment may play a role in exit from street gangs, religious cults and right-wing groups. Employment keeps people busy, provides ties to non-criminal (or non-extremist) peers and influences, and provides a source of income independent of the group.
- Individuals may be more likely to exit (or be more susceptible to calls for them to leave) when they become disillusioned with the group in some way – with the self-sacrifice that it demands, or with the ideology of the group.
- Exit might be more likely after a triggering event, such as a violent incident or 'near miss'. Individuals might be more susceptible to change at such a point.
- Membership may induce emotional and physical exhaustion and lead to 'burnout' and then to exit from the group. The strain of participating in high-risk activities may eventually become too much.
- Changing roles within a group might be a first step towards exit.

The following factors are cited as important in the sources that describe interventions with street gangs and/or right-wing extremist groups. They provide some potentially useful ideas that could inform interventions with Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups. However, the available evidence does not allow the REA to conclude that these factors are always successful in encouraging exit from street gangs or right-wing groups.

- Interventions must address several interlinked factors – for example, attitudes and beliefs, as well as practical problems related to accommodation, education and employment.
- Interventions should aim to improve social ties with family and friends outside the group. Best of all, interventions could actively involve family members.
- The provision of employment opportunities may support the exit process.
- Interventions could work with the wider community and involve many different agencies.

- Interventions could be targeted at trigger points – such as immediately following a violent incident, imprisonment, arrest or a change in family circumstances.
- An intervention must be designed to address the features of the particular group, based on information about who joins and why.
- Interventions operated by former members of the group may have a greater chance of successful engagement with members. Former members have credibility with current members, and have detailed knowledge of the motivations and aims of the group.

Lessons learned: factors associated with exit

Table 1 summarises which factors were mentioned in which fields of literature as being associated with exit. For each of these factors, methodological weaknesses in the sources mean that the REA is unable to draw conclusions about the extent to which these factors play a causal role in the process of exit from these groups (or indeed any role at all). However, they are associated with exit in the available research.

Positive social ties, the process of ageing and changing priorities are factors mentioned across all the areas of the literature (except organised crime). The prevalence with which they are mentioned suggests that they could be factors worthy of further investigation and research.

Disillusionment and changing roles are factors mentioned in the Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorism literature, as well as in relation to religious cults and right-wing groups.

Employment, education and burnout are not mentioned in the exiting terrorism literature. Their transferability from other groups to Al Qa'ida-influenced groups depends on assessments of the similarities between these different groups.

Table 1: Overview of factors associated with exit from different groups

	Positive social ties	Maturity and change in priorities	Disillusionment	Changing roles	Employment/education	Burnout
Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×
Street gangs	✓	✓	✓[a]	×	✓	×[b]
Religious cults	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Right-wing extremist groups	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓
Organised crime	×	×	×	×	×	✓

[a] Disillusionment features in the street gang literature if members tiring of the risk of violence is included.

[b] Equally, tiring of the risk of violence could be characterised as burnout.

Lessons learned: interventions to encourage exit

There is no robust evidence as to what makes an effective intervention for encouraging individuals to exit Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups. Therefore, there are no interventions that this report confidently recommends as effective in supporting this process. The available descriptions of de-radicalisation programmes provide a good starting point for suggesting characteristics of programmes that warrant more robust testing.

Additionally, the 'good practice' reported in research into interventions with street gangs and right-wing groups is potentially promising practice, which could be employed in the field of terrorism and evaluated for its transferability and effectiveness.