PEACEWORKS

Disengaging and Reintegrating Violent Extremists in Conflict Zones

By Andrew Glazzard

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Drawing on key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and an open-source literature review, this report explores how violent extremists can be disengaged in conflict zones and reintegrated into mainstream society. The report examines both actual interventions (where they exist) and the political and security environments for disengagement and reintegration in three case study countries: Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria. It is one of several reports to emerge from a research project funded by the Countering Violent Extremism program at the United States Institute of Peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Contents

Summary

Violent extremism in conflict or postconflict zones, such as Nigeria's North East region, northeastern Syria, and northern Iraq, presents a different set of challenges from terrorism in stable contexts. The threat posed by people who have been radicalized or recruited by extremist groups is highly context-dependent: people join or associate with violent groups for many reasons, but in conflict zones there is more forced and circumstantial recruitment.

Conflict zones are also different because violence and fragility create challenging conditions for programs that address violent extremism, including those that seek to disengage and reintegrate former violent extremists. Basic security and safety cannot be guaranteed, access to expertise is limited, and the prospects for former extremists are uncertain. Lacking control over these factors, disengagement and reintegration programs in conflict zones generally have fewer resources and less agency than those in stable settings. Conflict zones also present particular legal and ethical problems, including questions about the legal status of former suspected militants and supporters who have not been subjected to any legal process. Stigmatization is a particularly significant barrier to rehabilitation in conflict zones, and programs have the potential to aggravate as well as to mitigate stigma.

Practitioners and policymakers sometimes ask what treatments are effective for disengaging and rehabilitating violent extremists, but there are no tried-and-true solutions that work across contexts. Instead, drawing on an approach to understanding social change programs known as "realist evaluation," which examines programs in terms of the relationship between their contexts, the outcomes they create, and the mechanisms they use, this report underlines the need to develop responses to former violent extremists that are both more varied and more specific. Programs need to be clear and specific in their aims and in which populations are being targeted: clarity in these matters will help determine what measures are appropriate in each instance. Such measures might focus on the conditions in which programs take place rather than on their content, or may seek to influence attitudes in receiving communities so that they become more receptive to reintegrating former extremists. With this approach, deradicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration—concepts that are the source of some confusion—can be seen as different but potentially valid aims of programs. Which aim is appropriate will depend on the context and on the target population.

The recommendations that conclude this report focus on matching mechanisms to target context, locale, and population. In particular, policymakers working on disengagement and reintegration should focus on which mechanisms will achieve what outcomes, and design programs that have sufficient flexibility to respond dynamically to increased understanding of the target group. The legal basis for interventions also needs to be clear and uncontested, and this requires concerted attention from governments and international organizations.

Men suspected of being Islamic State fighters are searched at a security screening center near Kirkuk, Iraq, on October 1, 2017. (Photo by Ivor Prickett/New York Times)

Introduction

Dealing with people who leave violent extremist groups has become one of the most pressing security issues of our time. The territorial defeat of ISIS (Daesh or ISIL) in Syria and Iraq has left thousands of former members or supporters of the group—Syrians, Iraqis, and foreigners—in prisons or displacement camps, alongside thousands more with no perceived affiliation. What to do with a relatively small number of foreign volunteers for ISIS, particularly women and children, in camps in northeastern Syria such as al-Hol has been at the center of a major political controversy in Western countries, while the much larger numbers of Syrians and Iraqis in the same camps have been largely overlooked in Western political circles. Their fate, however, is a pressing concern for communities in the region.[1]

This aspect of the ISIS legacy is as far from a solution as ever. But some believe that any solution must

involve *deradicalization*, a process intended to reverse the indoctrination into violent extremist ideology and behavior.[2] Only by taking these ISIS remnants through a course of corrective treatment, so the argument goes, can they be rehabilitated and thereby reintegrated into communities. Without treatment, it is simply too risky to allow them out of the prisons or camps in which they are incarcerated or interned.

It is easy to see why this argument is appealing to policymakers and to some of the communities most directly affected. The concept of radicalization, although criticized for having weak conceptual and empirical foundations, has attained such currency in discussions of violent extremism that it becomes difficult to conceive of either radicalization or deradicalization as anything other than a cognitive or ideological process: both terms imply

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that becoming a violent extremist and ceasing to be a violent extremist are about belief.[3] Most empirical research, however, shows that becoming a violent extremist predominantly entails a process of socialization, though one often accompanied by attitudinal change.[4] If radicalization is primarily a social process, it stands to reason that deradicalization is also.

Moreover, while radicalization functions as useful shorthand for the range of factors and pathways leading to violent extremism in Western contexts, it is less applicable in places where conflict dynamics, such as forced recruitment, remunerated recruitment, influential kinship networks, and affiliation out of self-protection, are likely to be more salient than the persuasiveness of extreme ideologies. This heightened role of conflict dynamics suggests a number of problems. First, although programs described as supporting deradicalization may incorporate multiple approaches (as can be seen in some instances discussed in this report), focusing on ideology and attitudes as opposed to recruitment factors such as salaries and threats of force is unlikely to result in a precise or comprehensive response.[5] Second, although recent research has illuminated some of the motivations and processes behind what psychologists usually label terrorist disengagement (a more neutral term than "deradicalization" that simply denotes the process of leaving a terrorist or violent extremist group or movement), there is still a lack of validated knowledge of the effectiveness of programmatic interventions to disengage violent extremists, so the field is some distance from being clear about what constitutes an effective treatment to promote, facilitate, or support disengagement.[6] Similarly, little is known about how to ensure that disengaged extremists are able to recover from their experiences and activities and become functioning members of society—processes that are sometimes termed *rehabilitation* and

reintegration.[7] Third, it is unclear whether a deradicalization or disengagement or rehabilitation treatment can be administered effectively in conditions of chronic insecurity or conflict, and at the scale required to make a difference to hundreds or even thousands of people in fairly short order.[8] Fourth, insofar as no treatment is ever likely to be effective in all cases all the time, by what criteria should success be judged? For instance, is recidivism (reoffending or returning to the violent group) the most appropriate yardstick for judging success, and if so, what rate of recidivism can be tolerated?[9] Fifth, if the ultimate aim of the treatment is to ensure reintegration, what level of assurance should a community expect before receiving a former supporter or member of a group such as ISIS?[10]

These are some of the more pressing and obvious problems with deradicalization as a solution to the ISIS legacy. There are others: legal problems (What is the legal status of people undergoing deradicalization or disengagement or rehabilitation treatment? Can they be forced to undergo treatment?), ethical problems (Is it right to subject people to unproven treatments even if they volunteer?), and political problems (Who is responsible and accountable in such regions as northeastern Syria that are not under the control of a recognized state?). There are many substantial differences between conducting violent extremist disengagement interventions in a stable setting such as Western Europe or North America and attempting them in conflict zones.

This report examines how disengagement and reintegration of violent extremists are being attempted in fragile and conflict-affected places. Drawing on existing research into disengagement and reintegration and on new primary research conducted by the author into recent or current programs in three case study countries, Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria, the report underscores that

disengaging and reintegrating former violent extremists in conflict conditions is fundamentally different from doing so in conditions of stability. In many ways it is much more challenging. The report therefore proposes that policymakers and practitioners should think differently about disengagement in unstable contexts and recognize that *what* can be achieved and *how* are determined by *where* the program is taking place and *whom* it is targeting.

In discussions of disengagement, it is often said that context matters.[11] That truism understates the importance of context. Context potentially covers everything from the physical setting in which the treatment takes place to the political, economic, and social environment of the country, area, or region; and in some scholarship on social interventions, it includes the population being treated and the relationships and social capital of the intervention's stakeholders.[12] When we talk about context, therefore, we must be clear what we mean. But if disengagement is necessarily different in unstable places compared with stable ones, it follows that context at some level determines what can be achieved and how. And context is even more determinative for reintegration because the receiving community moves into the foreground to become the primary focus of the intervention.[13]

Acknowledging the importance of context, this report adopts an approach to understanding social interventions known as realist evaluation. This approach emphasizes that interventions work (or fail to work) as a result of the interplay between and among context, mechanism (i.e., how the intervention works), and outcome.[14] The report follows realist evaluation in arguing for a clearer understanding of outcomes, both intended and actual, than currently appears to be the case in programmatic interventions. The academic literature on disengagement and deradicalization has debated the relative merits of the two terms, with a general but incomplete agreement that the former is more appropriate to denote the process of leaving a violent group, while the latter should be reserved for programmatic

interventions to facilitate leaving.[15] This report draws a slightly different conclusion. Based on a study of actual programs in three countries, it suggests that, when applied to programs, the terms usefully denote different outcomes, with deradicalization—attitudinal and behavioral change—being the stated aim of some interventions and disengagement (i.e., predominantly a change in behavior) being the aim of others. It also suggests that many of the similar terms used in this field—desistance, defection, demobilization, rehabilitation, reintegration, reinsertion—can cease to be a source of confusion and become instead a useful lexicon of potential choices. Thus Operation Safe Corridor, which is described by the Nigerian government and by donors as a DDRR (demobilization, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation) program, has at least four intended outcomes. In fact, as discussed later in the case study on Nigeria, it turns out to have a fifth outcome, defection (i.e., Boko Haram recruits are encouraged to leave the group and enter the program). The question for those judging Operation Safe Corridor's effectiveness, therefore, is the extent to which it achieves all of its intended outcomes, not just disengagement.

A third area of emphasis in this report concerns *how* the intervention works (in realist evaluation, the mechanism). A deradicalization program may include any number of activities, from sports to art therapy to vocational training to religious instruction. Each activity implies one or more mechanisms. Psychologists, looking particularly at Western examples, have identified some of the social and psychological mechanisms that may cause someone to leave terrorism behind.[16] But if a program claims success, what actually caused the desired change to be achieved? Where interventions have multiple components, it can be hard to be sure which one had what effect, or whether they somehow worked in combination.[17] And the mechanism is not the same as the activity. The mechanism is like the active ingredient in a medicine: it may (for example) be the development of agency or self-esteem, or the positive reinforcement that comes through forming new social

On October 20, 2017, members of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces walk inside a prison built by Islamic State fighters at the stadium that was the site of Islamic State fighters' defeat in Raqqa, Syria. (Photo by Asmaa Waguih/AP)

relationships, rather than the sport or creative activities that a program delivers.

None of the programs discussed in this report has been fully evaluated, so these questions cannot yet be answered for particular cases, let alone in general. But drawing on theory and on the content of the three case studies, the report shows that interventions need to match the treatment to the intended outcome, the target population, and the context. It proposes that effectiveness in disengagement and reintegration cannot be judged in general because outcomes are so context dependent.[18] In particular, the report argues that it is critical to define the target population precisely. While this might seem obvious, the case studies underscore that some programs are so poorly targeted that many of those undergoing treatment are not, in fact, violent extremists by any measure.

Finally, because context is both determinative and multi-level, and because a single program may have several planned outcomes, the report calls for a more precise understanding of outcomes. The scientific literature has debated whether recidivism rates should be the principal yardstick by which to judge disengagement and reintegration programs, and this report agrees with those studies that argue for broader measures of success.[19] As the case studies show, interventions may have unintended outcomes, including negative or counterproductive ones. Several interventions discussed here have been criticized on human rights grounds for restricting basic rights or even mistreating individuals, and for lacking a solid legal basis for their activities. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, negative or counterproductive outcomes have the potential to aggravate trauma, existing tensions, and conflict factors and to contribute to general instability, violence, and crime.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this report used a qualitative case study method. Three countries for study were selected on the basis of three criteria: the presence of conflict or high levels of general insecurity, the involvement of violent extremist groups, and the presence of a population of former members of violent groups who could be eligible for disengagement and reintegration. The project was exploratory and focused as much on conditions as on actual interventions, so the criteria did not include the existence of an actual program; however, programs were identified and examined in each case. The list of countries was narrowed down in consultation with United States Institute of Peace experts to the three countries of greatest policy interest: Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria. Owing to the political situation in Syria, that case study was concerned only with the country's northeast, which at the time of writing was under the control of the Syrian Democratic Council and Syrian Democratic Forces. And because few programs have been publicly acknowledged, no inclusion or exclusion criteria were used beyond the program relating to disengagement, deradicalization, or reintegration in the three countries of interest.

Sources for the research were a combination of relevant documents (obtained through open-source searching and requests made to key informants), key informant interviews (33 conducted between January and June 2021), and two focus group discussions with 15 officials from the Nigerian Correctional Service. All interviews and focus groups were conducted online or by telephone as COVID-19 restrictions precluded travel to the selected countries. Thirty-one informants (interviewees and focus group participants) were primary source interviewees who were selected on the basis of their firsthand knowledge of disengagement or reintegration interventions or of the conditions in the case study country, and 17 were experts consulted for their general knowledge of the country or their expertise in the thematic issues relevant here. A literature review focusing on disengagement and reintegration in fragile and conflict-affected places identified and assessed 48 relevant studies. Most primary source interviewees were identified through the literature review, expert consultation, and the snowball method. All interviewees have remained anonymous in this report.

The analysis framework was derived from the realist evaluation approach developed by British sociologists Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley in the 1990s.[20] In keeping with their framework, data from interviews, focus groups, and documents were coded under the headings "context," "mechanism," and "outcome," with context then subdivided into "sociopolitical environment," "setting," and "population." The case studies that follow sought to examine all five dimensions, although the number of programs and the level of detail available on them varied significantly.

Iraq: Punishment, Stigma, and Trauma

Iraq was identified as a case study country because it has a very high number of former ISIS members and was, along with Syria, most directly affected by first the rise and then the military defeat of the Islamic State group. However, as the following section shows, Iraq also appears to have few disengagement or deradicalization programs, although significant UN-led interventions focusing on community reintegration were examined.

CONTEXT AND POPULATIONS: IRAQ'S ISIS LEGACY AND PERCEIVED AFFILIATION

The long period of insurgency and conflict in Iraq from 2003 to the present has created a particularly unpromising social and political environment for disengagement and reintegration of violent extremists. During its territorial control of swaths of northern and central Iraq, ISIS victimized millions, who were murdered, wounded, imprisoned, subjugated, or displaced, and the legacy of ISIS continues to be felt physically and psychologically by communities across northern Iraq. ISIS's rule amplified sectarian divisions, which have been further aggravated by external interference and by paramilitary groups acting as surrogates for national security forces. Despite massive intervention and support from national and multilateral donors, Iraq's governance institutions are chronically weak and have been weakened further by years of conflict, as well as by corruption, infiltration, and an economic crisis. Sporadic terrorism and low-level insurgency challenge the national security forces and ensure their continued reliance on paramilitary groups. The picture is complicated by the effective

autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the country's northeast, which operates its own administrative, military, and security apparatus.

The federal government's policy and practices have consistently preferred punishment, including capital punishment, as the solution to ISIS membership and activity. In the words of one US government official, the Iraqi government has a criminal justice machine and a legal code and has used them "to impose a solution."[21] However, the federal government does not apply an impartial, rule-of-law–based approach. Arrests are often arbitrary or motivated by retaliation, civil disputes, or the prospect of ransom. Iraq's terrorism courts operate in a cursory fashion: capital and long custodial sentences are meted out following brief trials that lack basic safeguards in terms of rules of evidence and legal representation for the accused. Amnesty International has also recorded allegations of extrajudicial executions.[22]

Community attitudes toward those perceived to have been tainted by ISIS, even by association, are a major aspect of ISIS's legacy in Iraq, prompting the UN's special rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons to raise concerns in 2020 about the "widespread discrimination" against what UN agencies in Iraq refer to as "persons formerly associated with ISIL/Daesh in Iraq" and sometimes as families of perceived affiliation (FPAs), a term that reflects the concern that such families are suspect and often stigmatized.[23] One interviewee who has worked with FPAs described their treatment by the federal
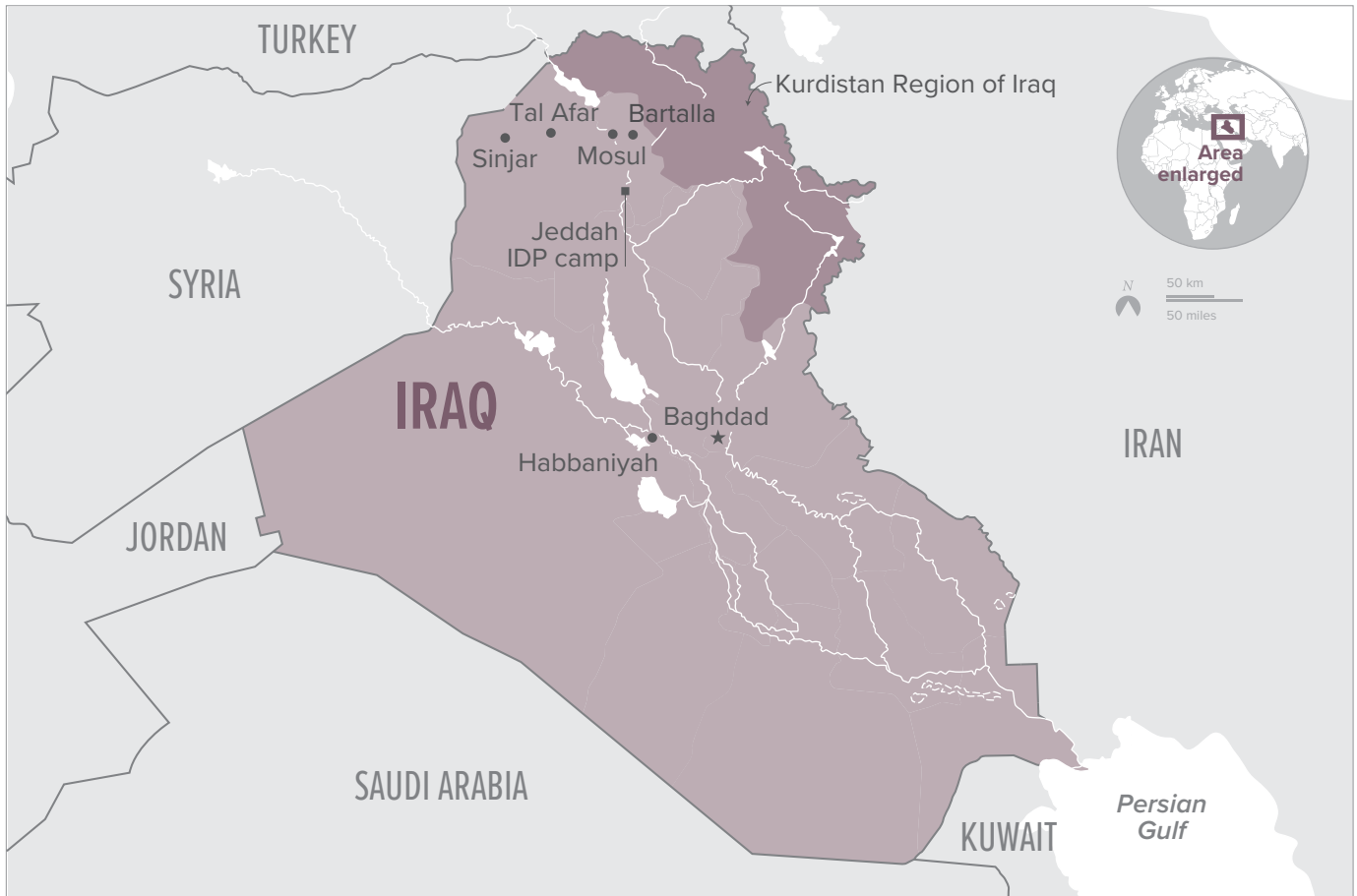
Iraq

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

government, local authorities, and communities as a form of "collective punishment," with rights being infringed and basic services withheld. Another said that the adverse perception could arise for any number of reasons other than actual affiliation: female-headed households or families in certain internally displaced person (IDP) camps are routinely viewed as suspect.[24] As of 2020, FPAs numbered over 60,000 families (around 300,000 people) in at least 77 IDP camps, most of which have since been closed.[25] A consistent message in the literature and in responses from interviewees for this study was that, while community attitudes vary, in general there is enormous reluctance to accept ISIS-associated individuals or their families into communities. As the subgovernor of one town in northern Iraq wrote in an email to the author:

The community isn't prepared to receive those who have committed murder or rape of women and children, as well as those who gave their allegiance to the organisation [ISIS] or continue to have extremist views or glorify their filthy deeds and their families, especially from the perspective of the families of innocent victims.[26]

This observation illustrates a wider concern to ensure that the rights of victims and their families are paramount, a concern that informs both Iraqi government policy and attitudes among local authorities and communities. That said, the subgovernor added that the community is open to the reintegration of those who do not have blood on their hands:

There's no place for those (directly) connected with ISIS, but for the families there is no objection to their absorption.

> A group of families have already been integrated and there were some objections from families of the victims. We advised the security authorities of the integration to silence the objectors, after confirming the positive intention of the returning families.[27]

Even within the most affected governorates of northern Iraq, however, there are significant variations in attitudes toward FPAs. For example, surveys commissioned by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have shown that communities in Mosul are generally more receptive than villages and smaller towns, but smaller habitations also vary, with some towns and villages being highly resistant to receiving FPAs and others having actually received some.[28] Similarly, Husham al-Hashimi's survey of governors, officials, and tribal leaders across northern and western Iraq found a range of views on reintegrating FPAs: some respondents viewed reintegration as a necessity, but others thought it impossible, given the sensitivities and risks, including risks to the families themselves.[29] Differing views may result from such factors as experiences of ISIS atrocities (Iraqi victims of ISIS violence tended, unsurprisingly, to have more negative attitudes toward FPAs) or tribal affiliation and composition.[30]

In their 2020 "Joint Approach," an unpublished strategy document on community-based reconciliation and reintegration, UN agencies working in Iraq disaggregated populations of interest into "stayers (persons who remained in the community in the formerly ISIL-controlled areas), other returnees (former internally displaced persons or refugees), at-risk youth, victims, and female-headed households."[31] This categorization is potentially helpful for planning disengagement and reintegration interventions as it shows that different groups have been affected by ISIS in different ways. And it may be possible to differentiate further still. Within the category of FPAs, one international official referred to families who had one or more members active in ISIS—as opposed to, for example, families who were merely unfortunate enough to have lived

in ISIS-held territory—as "red-line" families. According to this official, red-line families have little hope in the immediate term of returning to their former homes or of being integrated into other communities, so either they have stayed in Jeddah, the remaining IDP camp, or they have made their way to one of the informal settlements that have grown up on the outskirts of Mosul. Another interviewee mentioned families from al-Hol camp in Syria as attracting very high levels of suspicion because the camp is perceived to have become a center for ISIS activity, although the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq reported in April 2022 that around 450 families (comprising around 1,800 individuals) had been repatriated in the previous year, suggesting an increasing willingness on the part of Iraq's government to accept such families.[32] The Joint Approach document also acknowledges, however, that the line between victim and perpetrator is often blurred.

A further population category is that of children, including those forcibly recruited by ISIS (the so-called *Ashbal al-Khilafa* or "Cubs of the Caliphate"), children born to women who were abducted and raped by ISIS members, and children within other FPAs. Children were conscripted into ISIS by various routes, including abduction from ethnic and religious minorities: several thousand Yazidi children under age 14 were abducted from Sinjar in 2014, for example, while others were recruited as orphans, as the children of ISIS members and affiliates (including foreign fighters), or simply as members of families resident in ISIS-controlled territory.[33]

The recruitment of children undermines the straightforward categorization of voluntary and involuntary recruitment. A child who participates in violence willingly may be considered to lack legal responsibility, while an abducted child might over time become indoctrinated to an extent comparable to that of an ideologically motivated adult recruit. This distinction has important implications for disengagement and reintegration: whereas all children involved with ISIS can and arguably should

be considered victims, the needs and risks they present are likely to differ significantly.

Children affiliated with ISIS are subject to varying degrees of stigmatization. According to one interviewee who works for a civil society organization (CSO) on the reintegration of ISIS child soldiers, a "hierarchy of suspicion" obtains in Iraq that relates not so much to what the children have done as to who they are—identity thus determining perceptions of threat posed and treatment deserved. Some, such as abducted Yazidi children, are seen as more deserving and less culpable than, for example, Sunni Arab children who were coerced. This means that some categories of children have greater access to disengagement and reintegration programs, and these programs are more likely to attract donors and other supporters who would otherwise be unwilling to be associated with perceived perpetrators.[34] Those at the bottom of the hierarchy may face denial of services and the infringement of basic rights and needs, a situation compounded by the federal government's failure to develop laws and policies to redirect blame and responsibility from child victims to adult perpetrators or to prohibit child soldier recruitment.

OUTCOMES: PUNISHMENT, REHABILITATION, OR REINTEGRATION?

Within Iraq's criminal justice system, there is little evidence of attempts to disengage or reintegrate former ISIS members or associates, although the lack of transparency in the system makes it difficult to say with any certainty what is happening inside prisons.[35] Government officials, judges, and community leaders appear united in the view that ISIS supporters and sympathizers, irrespective of their actual histories, should be regarded as terrorists and subjected to the harshest punishments, and this undiscriminating perspective is reflected in Iraq's counterterrorism legislation, which criminalizes membership without requiring proof of an act of terrorism.[36] Underpinning this approach is a view of ISIS as both an ideological and a security or military threat: as one judge in Mosul put it, "Daesh's [ISIS's]

ideology is so dangerous that we cannot afford to show any leniency even for those who were only believers and did not commit specific crimes."[37] This emphasis on the ideological threat posed by ISIS—reflected in the federal government's countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy—overlooks the fact that many of those who lived in ISIS-controlled territory were coerced or had little choice but to cooperate with the ISIS regime.[38]

The federal government's response to social reconstruction after ISIS has thus created an environment that is unconducive to the disengagement and reintegration of former members and affiliates. In 2017–18, Mara Revkin found some evidence of attempts at disengagement that were clearly extensions of the punitive approach and that she labeled "coercive rehabilitation." The tactics included the cantonment of relatives of ISIS members in IDP camps for three purposes, according to the former chair of Iraq's National Reconciliation Council: to protect them from reprisals, to prevent them from communicating with ISIS, and to "re-educate and rehabilitate them in order to reverse the effects of three years of brainwashing." This national policy appears to have been followed at a local level: in 2017, the Mosul District Council decreed that families of ISIS members should be detained in "special camps where they can be rehabilitated psychologically and ideologically" and only allowed to return "after confirming their responsiveness to rehabilitation."[39] A rehabilitation camp at Bartalla near Mosul was created in the same year for 170 families forcibly relocated, only to be closed after Human Rights Watch reported at least 10 fatalities at or on the way to the camp.[40] As of 2018, five similar camps were still in operation, detaining at least 10,000 families in total.

Since Revkin's study, the federal government appears to have moved away from its support for compulsory rehabilitation in IDP camps, partly in response to objections to this policy from multilateral partners—two officials interviewed for this study separately described compulsory rehabilitation as unacceptable for their

organizations and for the international community more generally.[41] This departure from compulsion is also reflected in the federal government's CVE strategy, which is focused on prevention but which envisages rehabilitation for those who fell under the influence of ISIS. However, the strategy's limitations in relation to disengagement are also evident in its assumption that rehabilitation is largely a response to exposure to ISIS's ideology: it does not address structural factors, such as the political and economic marginalization of Sunni Arab communities, which are well-documented in accounts of the rise of ISIS in Iraq, or the enabling and contingent factors that need to be mitigated, such as the presence of extremist networks within communities.[42]

Despite often being legally innocent, FPAs constitute the most important and numerous population category for disengagement and reintegration in Iraq and are the focus of interventions led by UN agencies, notably the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), under its Social Cohesion Program in Iraq, and the IOM. The UN's Joint Approach document emphasizes community involvement, localized interventions, and building trust between communities as means of achieving three objectives: "reconciliation between returnees formerly associated with ISIL/Da'esh and receiving communities," "sustainable reintegration in Iraqi society of these returnees, whether they are children, young people or adults," and "increased resilience to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism in Iraqi communities."[43] Notably, the Joint Approach strategy envisages treating both "persons formerly associated with ISIL" and communities into which they are being reintegrated as target populations, differentiating between "participants" (those directly targeted by the programs) and "beneficiaries" ("all the members of the community at large who will benefit from the community-based reconcilitaiton [sic] and reintegration programs").[44] To put this into practice, the UNDP has brokered agreements through what it called Local Peace Committees (subsequently renamed Community

Dialogue Committees), structures established with UNDP support in Habbaniyah (Anbar Governorate), Muhalabiya (Mosul District, Ninewa Governorate), and Tal Afar (Ninewa Governorate) "to ensure the sustainable return and reintegration of families perceived to be affiliated with ISIL."[45] The UNDP has reported that hundreds of families have been accepted through these agreements.

The UN's programs suggest that the value of a disengagement intervention in a fragile or conflict-affected setting may lie as much in encouraging support for reintegration on the part of the community as it does in actually changing attitudes and behaviors among the subjects of the intervention. Respondents interviewed for this study and reports from UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and CSOs concur in emphasizing the importance of community preparedness for reintegration.[46]

MECHANISMS: REEDUCATION, TRUST-BUILDING, AND TRAUMA TREATMENT

When asked what would enable acceptance of FPAs back into the community, the most common response across all locations surveyed by the IOM was "ideological reeducation," especially for those families who were living in refugee camps in Syria, followed by security vetting and tribal sponsorship. This perception is consistent with data from the same survey showing that ideology was perceived by 78 percent of respondents to be a factor or the principal factor in recruitment to ISIS.[47]

However, ideology does not appear to be the focus of reintegration interventions in Iraq. UN interventions focused on FPAs seek to foster community acceptance through developing trust, creating processes for accepting returnees, and developing skills and attitudes among FPAs to support reintegration. In the case of IOM programs, this approach includes what amounts to a preventing violent extremism (PVE) approach by identifying and seeking to build resilience to drivers of extremism. In practice, this approach entails a package of activities, including the

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provision of basic safety measures, mental health support, livelihood support, social cohesion activities, and legal support. Similarly, a civil society–led (but Western-funded) initiative in IDP camps in and around Mosul has sought to create conditions for the return of IDPs, including FPAs, through cross-community activities focused on tolerance and shared heritage.[48]

Providing legal support is an important activity as studies of reintegration in Iraq suggest that customary justice measures can be important but potentially highly problematic mechanisms in fostering community acceptance of reintegrating families. These measures include *tabriya* ("disavowal," whereby an individual files a legal claim against a relative) and *ikhbar* ("informing," whereby an individual provides adverse information to the authorities about a family member or associate).[49] Such customary practices, when used to distance families from relatives with ISIS affiliation, potentially carry substantial weight among communities and can be part of a process of obtaining security clearance for families to enable their return. Use of customary practices is explicitly commended in the UN's Joint Approach. However, it is clear from interviews with international officials that some women are reluctant to disavow their former husbands, and encouragement to do so can therefore be seen as another form of coercion and stigmatization, making tabriya a potential obstacle to reintegration.[50] The substantial legal and ethical problems that result mean that donors and multilateral implementers cannot support such measures directly.[51]

Meeting the psychological and emotional needs of a subcategory of children is the focus of a program delivered by the SEED Foundation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The program seeks to treat trauma among a population of Yazidi children who had been held by ISIS while promoting broader and longer-term changes in community attitudes toward reintegration. Activities include the provision of mental health and psychosocial services and education, including an element designed to promote value complexity and reduce in-group/out-group thinking, rather than addressing ISIS ideology directly. The program's published report includes the story of one beneficiary who was abducted by ISIS at age seven, enslaved, subjected to various forms of abuse, and injured in an explosion. SEED provided medical treatment, legal support (he lacked identity documents), language instruction (ISIS had prevented him from speaking his native tongue), and various forms of mental health and psychosocial support to treat his depression and post-traumatic stress, including play therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. These treatments recognize not only that children are victims but also that their psychological and other needs are as much a consequence of exposure to the violent extremist group as any ideological or behavioral conditioning. Treating these issues may not constitute violent extremism disengagement in the commonly accepted sense, but it is nonetheless necessary and urgent to achieve reintegration.[52]

Northeastern Syria: Experiments in Disengagement and Rehabilitation

Syria was examined because it was—and remains—at the center of the reintegration and rehabilitation challenge. Vast IDP camps in northeastern Syria have held large numbers of individuals and families assumed to have been associated with ISIS, and although increasing numbers are being repatriated to their countries of origin (or third countries), thousands remain. But whereas Iraq has few programmatic interventions to disengage, deradicalize, and rehabilitate, Syria has had several programs, albeit without an overarching strategy or central direction.

CONTEXT AND POPULATIONS: INSECURE ENVIRONMENTS AND DISPLACED PEOPLE

Syria does not presently function as an integral, sovereign state. The bulk of the country (around two-thirds at the time of writing) is controlled by the Bashar al-Assad regime, based in Damascus, but parts of the north and northwest are controlled by Turkish-supported militias or directly by Turkey's armed forces (including areas seized following Turkish incursions in October–November 2019). Nestled among these is an area in Idlib Governorate that is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group that developed from an al-Qaeda–aligned group that splintered from the Islamic State of Iraq (later, ISIS) in 2013. Finally, covering a swath of northeastern Syria is an area sometimes known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), run by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US military ally, and its administrative manifestation, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). Despite being militarily backed by the West and having de facto responsibility for the region, AANES is not

recognized politically by any country or by the UN and operates under pressure from the Syrian regime to the south, Turkey to the north, and ISIS remnants on all sides and within; these problems are exacerbated by a collapsing Syrian economy, which has affected the northeast. Consequently, it suffers from a shortfall in perceived legitimacy, nationally and internationally.[53]

The fragmentation of Syria has created something of a natural experiment in terms of conditions for disengagement and reintegration. Interventions to achieve these outcomes are unimaginable in all parts except the SDF-controlled northeast, owing to the Assad regime's brutality, the HTS's ideology, and Turkey's political and military objectives. The context in the northeast is different, according to one Western official, partly because the SDC/SDF realizes it needs to do something about the tens of thousands of former ISIS members, their relatives, and others displaced by revolution and war.[54] However, for those currently in northeastern Syria but originally from areas under regime, HTS, or Turkish control, reintegration into their communities of origin is likely to be impossible. In addition, those repatriated to Iraq may be subject to punishment, including execution: five individuals returned to Iraq from northeastern Syria were reportedly sentenced to death.[55] Without guarantees of safety on return, therefore, many Iraqis are effectively trapped in the Syrian camps, although (as noted earlier) a significant number were repatriated in 2021–22.[56]

The SDC/SDF has not yet found a solution to dealing with former ISIS members and supporters. As of 2020, an estimated 10,000 suspected former ISIS members

Syria
Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

remained in 16 detention facilities, such as Dêrik prison in al-Malikiyah, near the border with Turkey, of whom around 8,000 were believed to be Syrian or Iraqi.[57] These facilities are largely beyond the reach of researchers, although one Western official interviewed for this study observed that many facilities are makeshift, and the conditions are so poor that some inmates have died, and others have attempted escape.[58] Major incidents have included a mass breakout in April 2019 that was quelled with US air support and, in January 2022, a complex, audacious ISIS attack on Ghwayran prison in Hasakeh, leading to a nine-day battle with SDF troops and significant casualties.[59] An even bigger population comprises the refugees and IDPs in overcrowded former camps in northeastern Syria, the most well-known being al-Hol camp near the Iraq border in al-Hasakeh Governorate,

originally built in 1991 for an estimated 10,000 refugees from Iraq. Al-Hol served as a camp for Syrians displaced by the civil conflict until the Battle of Baghuz Fawqani in 2019, the last major conventional battle against ISIS. The tens of thousands of perceived ISIS members, supporters, and families seized following the battle were then housed in al-Hol and other IDP camps such as al-Roj, so that ISIS suspects were (and continue to be) cantoned or detained alongside IDPs with no ISIS connection.[60] Although legally a displacement camp, al-Hol and other camps function as detention centers, as occupants are not allowed freedom of movement. At its height, the camp is believed to have held more than 72,000 individuals, but estimates as of April 2021 put the figure at just under 60,000 as a result of the release of Syrian families in autumn 2020 under what the SDC called a "general

amnesty" but that was actually an attempt at negotiating agreements with tribes to take responsibility for affiliated families.[61] Many IDPs and refugees lack identity documents, which prevents their returning to communities of origin even if they wish to do so.[62]

Al-Hol is and is likely to remain an inordinately challenging environment for any intervention, let alone one as sensitive and complex as disengagement as a prelude to reintegration. Several interviewees highlighted a cadre of "highly radicalized" women being among those detained after the Battle of Baghuz Fawqani, while media reporting includes film apparently showing women and children in the camp openly expressing support for ISIS.[63] At the time of writing, approximately 10,000 women and children were being held in an "annex" for foreigners, where conditions are so threatening that some international organizations refuse to enter.[64] Violence is a growing problem throughout the camp, with around 90 murders of camp residents, officials, and humanitarian workers (some of them with possible extremist involvement) having taken place during 2021.[65] ISIS remnants have fostered an atmosphere of intimidation so that even those unsympathetic to the group are pressured to show support. Al-Hol and other camps are also subject to crippling logistical and practical constraints, such as the closure of border crossings and a lack of suitably experienced or trained staff.[66] The limited resources mean that material conditions are not conducive for complex and sensitive disengagement and rehabilitation activities.[67] One interviewee, an analyst who has visited al-Hol and other camps, observed that the authorities struggle to get food into camps, so official disengagement and rehabilitation are likely to be all but impossible.[68] Other camps, such as al-Roj, are smaller and reportedly have better facilities.[69]

Western observers might be forgiven for thinking that the problem in northeastern Syria is mainly the 11,000 foreign (neither Syrian nor Iraqi) women and their children who traveled to join ISIS from at least 54 countries and who are now languishing in places such as al-Hol. Political debates over this cohort have diverted attention

from the much larger number (in the neighborhood of 60,000) of Syrians and Iraqis, a large proportion of whom are children, in refugee and IDP camps, many but not all of whom are suspected to have had an ISIS affiliation.[70] According to one interviewee, the SDF further categorized this group into hard-liners, low-risk individuals, and an intermediate category, assessing 65 percent as being in the first category and 15 percent to be low risk.[71] Many of the children held by the SDF became involved in ISIS activities through coercion, through family affiliation, or from birth: one interviewee stated that around 500 children were being held in SDF prisons. And there are men (foreign as well as Syrian and Iraqi) suspected of having had active or supporting roles in ISIS who have been detained by the SDF and are mostly (presumably) in one of several detention facilities known to exist in SDF-held areas. Kurdish news sources indicate that as of April 2021, the SDF held 12,000 to 15,000 mostly Iraqi and Syrian ISIS prisoners, plus more than 800 foreign fighters.[72] According to one interviewee, the foreign volunteers constitute a particularly "hard-line" category on account of their motivations (i.e., having traveled to fulfill an ambition rather than being coerced or responding to the pressure of circumstances).[73] However, according to another interviewee, there are also a significant number of Syrian men who have been co-opted into the SDF and AANES despite their ISIS histories.[74] This category is of great potential interest because it demonstrates a form of pragmatic reintegration without necessarily a disengagement intervention. Because of the sensitivity of this issue, however, it is unlikely that researchers would be granted access to this population.

SEVEN OUTCOMES FOR SEVEN PROGRAMS
Several interviewees questioned whether disengagement and rehabilitation interventions were even feasible in an environment like that of northeastern Syria, with some suggesting that resources would be better directed at developing social capital in accessible areas in Syria through community resilience programming.[75] One interviewee observed that, aside from the physical and practical constraints, the lack of control

> **Those returning to their communities of origin face stigmatization, ostracization, and potentially physical attacks. However, tribal dynamics offer potential avenues for intervention, insofar as tribal leaders often have the credibility to provide protection and assurance to the wider community.**

over the context and the chronic legal uncertainty for those in the camp mean that practitioners can offer very little by way of incentives for behavioral change or even hope for the future.[76] Several interviewees identified the lack of a stable and legitimate state as a major barrier to reintegration: weak institutional capacity and social capital to address the needs of returnees, plus the precariousness of the SDC/SDF administration, means that even a successful reintegration effort may be put at risk by changes in the political and security environment.[77] The fraught context makes reintegration even more challenging than disengagement. One interviewee commented that the AANES authorities lacked the resources for individualized treatment, sustained activities, or monitoring, so that any post-intervention activity would have to be conducted by communities.[78] Those returning to their communities of origin face stigmatization, ostracization, and potentially physical attacks.[79] However, tribal dynamics offer potential avenues for intervention, insofar as tribal leaders often have the credibility to provide protection and assurance to the wider community.[80]

Nevertheless, since 2018 (when one study found a lack of official drive for disengagement and rehabilitation and an absence of "official efforts to address the special needs of the wives and children of ISIS members who have either died or fled"), the SDC/SDF has developed its own interventions while providing support to other interventions being developed by international NGOs and CSOs.[81] This study identified seven planned, existing, or recent interventions in northeastern Syria from either published documents or interviews with respondents:

1. An initiative by the Syrian Kurdish CSO Waqfa Jin (Women's Foundation) in al-Hol and al-Roj
2. The Huri Center for children of IDPs exposed to ISIS influences

3. A strategic communications reintegration initiative delivered by a Western-based implementer, covering northern Syria and northern Iraq
4. A civil society reintegration initiative in the Deir-ez-Zor countryside[82]
5. A new disengagement and rehabilitation intervention being developed by a consortium of Western-based implementing agencies
6. Prison rehabilitation activities in Dêrik prison and other detention centers
7. The Counter-Extremism Center, which operated in 2018

This handful of interventions are aimed at wide-ranging outcomes. For example, the Waqfa Jin program aims to develop social capital among the female population of al-Hol through small-group social engagement activities. The Huri Center, created by the SDF in 2017 with a capacity of around 80, aims at disengaging and rehabilitating children who have been exposed to ISIS ideology and actions.[83] According to one analyst who has visited the center and interviewed staff, most of the children there have been "extracted" from al-Hol.[84]

The Deir-ez-Zor program, which launched in September 2020, is clearly focused on developing community and individual social capital and as such has common features with PVE approaches, the main difference being that the population has already been exposed to ISIS. Intervention 5 in the list above aims at disengagement and rehabilitation as a prelude to reintegration into communities in Syria and Iraq and proposes some important intermediate outcomes, including the protection of more tractable individuals from the influence of hard-liners in al-Hol by promoting healthier social structures.[85] In contrast, the Counter-Extremism Center, a ground-level initiative of its director, sought to prevent the reemergence of ISIS

and to defeat its ideology, which placed it nearer to the outcome of deradicalization than other programs in the region.[86] Beneficiaries were referred to the center by local courts empowered to make rehabilitation orders, so the center functioned as a detention and rehabilitation facility within the nascent criminal justice system.

MECHANISMS: TREATMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

In light of the breadth of outcomes, it is not surprising that these seven programs have employed wide-ranging mechanisms, though most focus on treating psychological or educational needs (or both). The Waqfa Jin program, for example, includes voluntary "consciousness-raising" seminars in al-Hol encompassing "psychological, philosophical and societal affairs," while educational interventions are carried out in al-Roj.[87] Whether this is a prevention (PVE) or disengagement intervention depends on the profile of its beneficiaries: developing resilience to the radicalizing influences of hard-liners is more preventative, while seeking to change attitudes and behaviors among those who already have some ISIS involvement would clearly constitute disengagement. The fact that the beneficiaries are volunteers suggests it is more the former; and according to one interviewee, the intervention recognizes that ideology was only one motivation for joining or remaining in ISIS. The same interviewee added that the intervention derives from the strong tradition of female empowerment in Kurdish communities in Syria and uses "humanist values" as a basis for developing empathy and solidarity, rather than being based in a "Western psycho-social approach." However, this is not just a design principle but also a consequence of lack of expertise in psychology: practitioners have to rely on what is available.[88]

The Huri Center focuses on "teaching a new value system in everyday life," principally

> democracy, peaceful coexistence and gender equality, which they transmit and put into practice through day-to-day

> life, interactions, and conversations . . . based on the conviction that if the children are shown a positive example and given the chance to live according to these values, they will gradually let go of violent and authoritarian ideas.[89]

It detains youths convicted of ISIS-related offenses and the children of foreigners who traveled to join ISIS. Although the youths are not allowed to leave, the center's managers say they are treated as victims rather than perpetrators and are reasoned with rather than punished for misbehavior. Respondents interviewed for this study judged the Huri Center to be a positive development, with one describing it as "really effective," despite the legal and ethical questions around consent and separating children from their parents.[90]

Intervention 5 in the list takes an explicitly "Western psycho-social approach" while avoiding the "medicalization" of violent extremism (i.e., framing it as primarily a mental health condition), which one of its implementers suggested was widespread in Western interventions. Instead, it seeks to build individual and community resilience; reduce polarized in-group/out-group thinking and behavior; reduce incentives to violence; and build trust through values-based social activities, teaching, and training in anger management and critical thinking.[91]

The Deir-ez-Zor program is community-focused and seeks to develop the social capital of former ISIS affiliates and their families (rather than former fighters) through community dialogue (often at a very local level), support for CSOs, livelihood support, and the provision of safety and security protection for women and children. The intervention seeks to work with local tribal dynamics, not to utilize tribal justice mechanisms but to take into account deep-rooted tribal affiliations.[92]

Only the Counter-Extremism Center took an avowedly ideological approach. A screening process separated participants into three groups—low risk (Syrians not involved in violence), medium risk (Syrians alleged to

> **In a setting like an IDP camp, interventions may need to work with whoever is willing or accessible. . . . Implementers need to respect the legal and ethical facts on the ground: a displaced person, even if suspected of harboring ISIS sympathies, is not a prisoner.**

have been involved in violence or criminality), and high risk (non-Syrians)—which shows that foreign volunteers were considered to present more ideological motivations (and were also more difficult to communicate with). Activities included religious training to inculcate a "moderate" Islam, sessions countering ISIS propaganda, psychosocial support, and an educational curriculum that included civic education and human rights. After a period ranging from one to six months, beneficiaries were released on the decision of local authorities based on the center's recommendations, with aftercare or probation. A small number of ISIS members in the low- and medium-risk groups were released, such as a youth who joined ISIS at age 12 who was released after four months.

The separation of populations by assessed level of risk is an important feature of several interventions, reflecting a wider priority for the SDF and its international supporters.[93] For example, some women and their children are being moved from al-Hol to al-Roj, which is intended by the SDF to be a more conducive environment for attention and support and has space for 400 families (though only around 220 were in the camp as of January 2021).[94] One interviewee, however, suggested that cantonment in al-Roj was more an

exercise in triage to determine and manage security risks than a prelude to disengagement and rehabilitation.[95] Moreover, because those held in displacement camps have not been subject to any kind of legal process, separating individuals according to the risk they are judged to present is difficult to justify legally and ethically, a problem compounded by the lack of recognition of AANES. In response, the SDF has decided that high-risk individuals can and should be separated if they have committed a crime.[96]

Identifying specific populations for treatment may be a pragmatic choice for programs. Intervention 5, for example, proposes using a structured, professional judgment risk assessment of a type increasingly used in Western settings (and used in Nigeria to triage populations on the basis of risk, as discussed in the following section).[97] But in a setting like an IDP camp, interventions may need to work with whoever is willing or accessible. For one thing, outside of custodial settings, where subjects can be required or strongly incentivized to attend programs, in IDP camps implementers need to respect the legal and ethical facts on the ground: a displaced person, even if suspected of harboring ISIS sympathies, is not a prisoner.

Nigeria: Deradicalization and the State

Like Syria and Iraq, Nigeria has faced a huge violent extremist threat and has been dealing with a large population of former militants and associates of violent groups. In other respects, however, it presents a very different case, as the central government has developed two major disengagement/deradicalization interventions, one of which is controversial but operates on a large scale.

CONTEXT: SIGNIFICANT THREAT, LIMITED CAPACITY

Northeastern Nigeria, particularly the states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, has long been prone to insecurity and conflict, a product of the region's marginalization and relative political and economic neglect.[98] Boko Haram emerged as a heterodox religious sect in Borno in the early 2000s. Following the failure of an attempted uprising in 2009, it transitioned to being a guerrilla movement, terrorist organization, and insurgent force, embroiling the Nigerian armed forces and those of neighboring states in an increasingly indiscriminate conflict that drew in Nigeria's neighbors in the Lake Chad Basin. By 2015, Boko Haram had become the world's most lethal terrorist group, controlling swaths of territory in the three northeastern states and neighboring countries.[99] The group is estimated to have killed around 35,000 to 50,000 in Nigeria, the majority of whom were killed in Borno State; and the UNDP has estimated that the wider conflict has displaced over three million people and contributed to the deaths of 350,000 in the Lake Chad Basin.[100]

Despite an intensifying security response, including a state of emergency in the northeastern states, Boko Haram became stronger territorially and militarily, so much so that in 2014, the federal government recognized that restoring a measure of security using military force alone would be impossible.[101] However, abuses and indiscriminate responses by the Nigerian armed forces drew widespread condemnation and substantially added to the narrative of grievance perpetuated by Boko Haram.[102]

An international coalition, the Multi-National Joint Taskforce, has largely defeated Boko Haram territorially, and Boko Haram's long-standing leader, Abubakar Shekau, was reportedly killed in 2021 in a confrontation with a Boko Haram splinter group, Islamic State–West Africa Province. However, the group remains a major threat in northeastern Nigeria and in 2021 became more prolific and audacious in its attacks. The chronic insecurity in the region (including banditry and kidnapping for ransom) is the most obvious contextual factor for disengagement and reintegration interventions in this region, foregrounding the question of how individuals can be reintegrated into communities that are not under the full control of the authorities.[103]

Nigeria's institutions, meanwhile, remain plagued by problems of corruption and the impact of patronage networks on the allocation of resources. While Nigeria has experienced periods of significant economic growth in recent years, the benefits have been distributed unequally; and the country's North East remains impoverished and underdeveloped, so the insurgency feeds and is fed by the area's economic weakness. The criminal justice system is chronically underresourced, leading to a lack of expertise, bottlenecks

Nigeria
Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

in court processes, protracted periods for suspects on remand, and a lack of interagency cooperation.[104] In addition, Nigeria has an inconsistent record with respect to human rights. Both the federal government and its international supporters have mandated an approach that complies with human rights and is based in the rule of law, but this perspective must contend with a lack of compliance with human rights in the armed forces, which are accustomed to mounting kinetic responses to security threats.[105]

POPULATIONS: HIGH RISK, LOW RISK, AND NO RISK

Nigeria's national security strategy originally aimed to treat all levels of Boko Haram and all categories, including offenders, detainees, and volunteers. The

National Security Corridor (NSC) program from 2014 to 2015 sought directly to disengage Boko Haram fighters and members at all levels by promoting defection and processing military detainees in a rehabilitation program. However, the federal government altered course somewhat after public opposition to what was seen as favorable treatment for insurgents still engaged in a violent conflict.[106] Interviewees and some published accounts suggest that Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), the NSC's successor intervention, has been simultaneously less comprehensive and less focused. Although some studies and interviewees have reported that OSC is focused on former members of Boko Haram who were coerced into participating with the group but did not commit atrocities, others suggest that a lack of precise inclusion criteria and poor screening methods

have led to many innocent and stigmatized individuals being caught in the OSC net, including victims of Boko Haram.[107] OSC officials insist that the program does seek to target more entrenched members, both through a broadcast communications campaign and through direct appeals from OSC beneficiaries to their former associates still "in the bush."[108] An International Crisis Group report, citing interviews with 23 OSC graduates in March 2020, estimates that at most a quarter of OSC cohorts are from its target group of "low-level but committed jihadist recruits," with the rest being "civilians who fled areas controlled by Boko Haram and whom authorities then mistakenly categorised as jihadists and detained."[109] A donor interviewed for this study said that the primary driver for OSC had become providing a solution to the problem of excessive numbers of military detainees. As a result, OSC has gone from dealing with tens to dealing with hundreds: a pilot project started with six individuals, but this and three initial cohorts amounted to 920 men in total as of mid-2021, of whom at least 543 have reportedly been reintegrated.[110] For subsequent programs, the OSC aims to have more than 600 in each six-month cohort.[111]

The mass trial of 1,669 Boko Haram suspects at Wawa Military Cantonment in Kainji in Niger State in 2017–18 illustrates starkly the ethical and legal issues raised by OSC's targeting. A Nigerian judge "sentenced" 97 acquitted defendants to enrollment in OSC on the grounds that they had been subjected to radicalizing influences.[112] In addition, OSC receives "special clients" who have served prison sentences but are still considered to require rehabilitation.[113] Aside from the many concerns about the quality of the processes involved, the blurring of the line between the criminal justice sector and military/security detention further undermines the purpose of disengagement interventions and the status of OSC as a provider of voluntary intervention.[114]

From its inception, Nigeria's approach has included facilities and interventions specifically for women and children. Two camps are supposed to be for women,

notably the Bulumkutu Rehabilitation or Transit Centre in Maiduguri for 1,300 women and children who were captured or rescued from Boko Haram, although men were also held at the center in a separate unit until the creation of the Bulumkutu Centre.[115] OSC's design clearly shows that women and children are assumed to require less treatment than men, as they are subject to a much shorter treatment program lasting 8–12 weeks and consisting mostly of vocational training for adults and education for children, plus counseling and religious instruction; some are returned to families or community leaders after triage without undergoing any treatment.[116] However, according to one former official involved in developing the program, it is important to disaggregate women as a category in disengagement as female volunteers proved to be particularly challenging subjects for disengagement, possibly because they had taken more risk by joining the group, or perhaps because they enjoyed greater benefits in terms of status and material rewards.[117]

Boko Haram suspects in prison constitute a significant population, estimated at the time of writing as being between 1,000 and 1,500 held in four locations.[118] Again, this is a diverse category as it includes former active members and fighters, including some "with blood on their hands," as well as many individuals (the majority, according to one focus group discussant) who have been charged with terrorism offenses but have not been sentenced.[119] Interventions targeting prisoners began at the same time as the NSC with a pilot program in Kuje prison that was envisaged to be scaled up to encompass all Boko Haram suspects in Nigeria's prisons, although there was a hiatus between 2015 (when the pilot ceased) and 2017 (when a larger-scale program was initiated).[120] From the outset, the intervention relied on a risk and vulnerability psychometric assessment (a notable feature of Western-centric disengagement programming) that measured attributes in seven categories (such as ideology, attitudes, and history of trauma). The assessment of needs and risks is used to guide individual-specific responses.[121]

> The architects of the [National Security Corridor] saw a need to encourage defections in addition to working with captured militants and suspects, and to change behavior so that beneficiaries became "more productive citizens" through meeting their psychological needs and influencing beliefs.

Policies vary between prisons as to colocation of violent extremist offenders and suspects with nonextremists. The program is restricted to volunteers, who are recruited at events called "town hall meetings" for those charged with terrorism offenses. Around 90 percent of those attending volunteer for the program and become "designated interested clients" once accepted. The prison's local treatment team then uses a structured professional judgment approach supported by a risk assessment instrument based on the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment to triage clients into low-, medium-, and high-risk cases.[122] The process includes input from a psychologist and an imam, and the risk assessment is reviewed quarterly by the treatment team and also at an annual or biannual case conference. Clients considered to be making insufficient progress are allocated to more intensive treatments. Conferences include peer assessments to improve the quality of decision-making.[123]

OUTCOMES: MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES, UNPLANNED EFFECTS

In its counterterrorism strategy, the Nigerian federal government embraced noncoercive measures. More specifically, it sought to encourage defection and hoped to "deradicalize" defectors and captured members through cantonment, treatment, and support through the NSC program under the aegis of the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA).[124] A former National Youth Service camp at Mallam Sidi in Gombe State was repurposed as a cantonment facility with a capacity of around 650.[125] Drawing on examples of the so-called deradicalization centers in Saudi Arabia and Singapore that emerged in the post-9/11 years and on the more mature field of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), Nigeria labeled its approach demobilization, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation (DDRR), suggestive

of a refinement to or expansion of DDR initiatives.[126] A complementary prison disengagement initiative was piloted in Kuje maximum security prison in March–April 2015 with 40 to 50 prisoners in a building segregated from the rest of the prison.[127]

Challenges to the disengagement and reintegration components of the counterterrorism strategy included a hiatus following the change of government in 2015. While prison disengagement did not restart until 2017, the NSC became Operation Safe Corridor, with similar objectives and with strong political backing from the new president; theoretically under ONSA's civilian leadership, implementation of OSC was largely in the hands of the army.[128] The program was also coordinated with neighboring countries through the Lake Chad Basin Stabilization Strategy and the African Union's DDR program.[129]

OSC is a wide-ranging program that uses multiple mechanisms to achieve several different outcomes. Its stated aim is "to deradicalize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate defectors" or "repentant insurgents," which implies ideological change, behavioral change, social acceptance, and defection from Boko Haram.[130] The deradicalization component engages three aspects, religious ideology, social and political grievances, and trauma, suggesting a broader understanding of deradicalization than addressing extremist attitudes.[131] The architects of the NSC saw a need to encourage defections in addition to working with captured militants and suspects, and to change behavior so that beneficiaries became "more productive citizens" through meeting their psychological needs and influencing beliefs; reintegration was seen as a later challenge. The NSC was also viewed as a way of dealing with a huge backlog of captives.[132]

Nigerian government officials interviewed for this study described OSC's intended outcomes as defection ("surrender" and "repentance") and "deradicalization." OSC's military leadership insists that defection is not equivalent to amnesty, with the Mallam Sidi facility commander describing the program as a "nonkinetic approach to warfare," suggesting a military rather than criminal justice framing of the outcome.[133] The degree of radicalization is assessed by a local treatment team, and individuals assessed to have made insufficient progress are subjected to further treatment or are recategorized as high risk. On completion, a quasi-judicial panel of traditional leaders, lawyers, and justice officials established by the IOM and the Ministry of Justice makes a formal assessment, and the panel's approval, along with the individual's renunciation of Boko Haram and pledge to support the state, is required for graduation.[134] At this point, the individual is considered legally innocent and free. However, published accounts and some interviewees observed that there is some uncertainty about the process of completion and that some persons categorized as "graduates" are transferred to other camps rather than to their communities.[135]

OSC's oversight committee saw the program's aims as managing the consequences of the insurgency and helping to bring the crisis to an end by providing alternative opportunities for the insurgents. It identified the program's objectives as (1) to influence attitudes, behaviors, and level of conviction of the insurgents to encourage surrender; (2) to provide repentant insurgents with safe passage; and (3) to rehabilitate them.[136] These objectives represent a continuation from the NSC program objectives but with additional emphasis on encouraging defection across the Lake Chad Basin region (those who surrender in other countries will be handed over to OSC) and reassuring communities about reintegration. This latter aim responds to previously high rates of community resistance and rejection of beneficiaries owing to lack of consultation and the perception that extremists were benefiting from their prior association.[137]

The effectiveness of OSC is a matter of some debate. Nigerian officials and donors interviewed for this report were clearly proud of the program as a major contribution to reducing Boko Haram's fighting strength, and they highlighted very low instances of recidivism and increasing community acceptance.[138] Between 2016 and March 2021, 920 participants were admitted to the program, and 890 have been transferred to state and national authorities; foreign graduates have been handed over to the authorities in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. As of March 2021, OSC was also scaling up, preparing to take a new cohort of around 600, with a further thousand having surrendered. Officials reported that every graduate is documented and can be traced, and only one individual refused treatment and was trying to negatively influence others (he was removed and recategorized to face a criminal justice process).

OSC experienced early setbacks in reintegration, including a well-reported case in Gwoza, where local residents protested at the arrival of OSC graduates, who had to be returned to the program.[139] A 2018 study criticized OSC for failing to prepare communities for the return of OSC beneficiaries and for failing to address stigmatization: "Many Nigerians in the northeast make little distinction between populations who had to endure Boko Haram rule and actual Boko Haram members."[140] Against this background, attempts to rehabilitate those associated with Boko Haram, let alone active members, has led to significant community resentment, with some in the community believing that reintegration is appropriate only once the conflict is over. This helps to explain why some beneficiaries were not released from OSC following completion of their program, such as 96 "defectors" who were held in Gombe for many months after completion; the insecurity of some regions of Nigeria's North East may also be a factor. One 2018 study reported that 1,800 women and children had been returned to their communities, but none of the 96 men who had completed the program at the time

of writing had been reintegrated.[141] More positive figures show that 254 ex-combatants had been reintegrated by December 2018, while in October 2019, a further 132 were released for reintegration.[142]

Survey data show that just over half of those polled in communities in northeastern Nigeria view OSC as rewarding perpetrators over victims, although this sentiment is not unusual among communities hosting DDR programs outside Nigeria.[143] But OSC has been criticized at the national and state levels as well as at the community level, with the Borno State governor calling for a review of the program in response to (contested) reports of recidivism.[144] However, it is also clear that some criticism of OSC is politicized, reflecting political polarization and ethnic and confessional divides.[145] OSC now includes significant interaction between communities and OSC officials, with what one official called "overwhelmingly positive" results, and both donors and OSC officials attribute a reduction in previously high rates of community rejection to this outreach strategy.[146] This perception is supported by survey data showing that OSC graduates tend to think communities will be more hostile to them than they actually are: fewer than 40 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that graduates remain dangerous and should not be allowed back, whereas the graduates themselves predicted the figure would be nearer 85 percent. However, 40 percent is still a high figure, even if it varies geographically. But a majority of respondents were supportive of reintegration in principle: 64 percent were in favor of reintegration, and 69 percent said they were ready to accept OSC graduates.[147] Crucially, qualitative evidence from the same study indicates that trust in reintegrated graduates builds over time: in the words of one community member,

> The ones that just reintegrated into the community, we cannot trust them yet because we do not really know them. For those that have been with us now for many months, we have interacted with them, we know them, and we are friends with them because they are no longer violent.[148]

These findings are supported by interviews for a separate study that found that only 3 of 13 graduates faced ostracism from their families on return.[149]

Separately, at least one CSO, the NEEM Foundation, is working with communities to help create the conditions for reintegration, including through trauma counseling. This illustrates the potential partnership that could take shape among the federal government, the state government, and civil society.[150]

Although it is part of the same counterinsurgent strategy, Nigeria's prison disengagement evolved in its own way from its 2015 pilot. Initially, officials assumed that the violence was religiously motivated, and the pilot aimed to change beliefs as well as behaviors through education (religious, vocational, and general), therapy, and counseling.[151] Increasingly, however, officials realized that whereas ideology motivated some individuals, other factors were at work. As a result, the successor program focused more on disengagement and rehabilitation by addressing needs rather than on deradicalization by addressing ideology.[152]

MECHANISMS: COMPREHENSIVE APPROACHES

The theory behind Operation Safe Corridor was based on an analysis of motivations for joining, which identified a wide range of factors, including lack of opportunities, a yearning for adventure, a need for belonging, and a desire for meaning, with Boko Haram's ideological program and charismatic leadership supplying some of these needs. The ideological focus of the NSC and OSC—both were labeled "deradicalization" interventions by officials—reflects the government's enthusiasm for programs in Saudi Arabia and Singapore that had a substantial ideological component.[153] The treatments developed under the NSC included using defectors to encourage further defections in supervised telephone calls, which led to 47 defections; developing curricula for and implementing program activities (including education, vocational training, and values-based learning); and intensive, individual

counseling that aimed to develop self-realization as a prelude to identity change.[154]

OSC combines a range of treatments and approaches. A strategic communication program to encourage defection involves radio broadcasts, word-of-mouth advertising through families and friends, and (as with the NSC) direct appeals by telephone. An independent evaluation found an increasing proportion of OSC intakes (from 25 percent in the first two cohorts to 33 percent in the third) volunteered to enter the program because they had heard about it by word-of-mouth or from a radio program (36 percent of those who volunteered).[155] However, the same study showed that OSC has limited reach and penetration, especially outside Maiduguri (in Mafa, only 23 percent had heard of the program).[156] A separate (qualitative) study found that several OSC volunteers responded to the communication campaign and were reassured by its message of safe transit, having feared that the military's response to surrendering would be to kill them.[157]

OSC has attracted substantial development assistance and is implemented with strong international support from the IOM and other agencies. Its scale—it involves 13 departments and agencies and has a staff of 380, including 180 experts—suggests it commands significant resources.[158] In addition to the main facility for men at Mallam Sidi, OSC also uses two transit and rehabilitation centers at Bulumkutu (primarily for women and children, as well as for men who have reached the reintegration phase) and a newer facility at Shokari for men.[159] However, OSC has suffered from significant logistical and local-political constraints, which have extended time spent in Mallam Sidi and at the transit centers and left individuals with little clarity over timelines.[160] Conditions in some facilities are reportedly very poor: an International Crisis Group report refers to "often gruesome detention facilities" where beatings and torture are rife. Giwa Barracks, where many began their journey into OSC, is a notorious facility where OSC recruits have reportedly died from the appalling conditions.[161]

The program at the OSC facility at Mallam Sidi is designed to last for six months and includes psychosocial support; vocational training based on an economic assessment of what is viable in Nigeria's North East; basic education, including "Western" education, in a direct challenge to Boko Haram's signature ideology, leading to a certificate of literacy; religious and spiritual counseling by clerics; psychological counseling by trained psychologists; psychosocial counseling by experts; and recreational therapies. There is also a counternarrative package, headed by the chief imam of the Nigerian army.[162] However, the length of an individual's stay is often much longer than six months and can be extended by circumstances. Participants are then transferred to one of two transit centers, Bulumkutu or Shokari. Donor country officials have observed that vocational skills training has become a priority as the federal government sees impoverishment and lack of livelihood opportunities as structural factors behind the insurgency, although some experts have questioned the appropriateness of this focus, insofar as the lack of development in the North East presents a significant barrier to reintegration, and OSC itself is unlikely to fix such a fundamental issue.[163]

The psychosocial element of OSC has been highlighted as its most innovative and effective component, even though it is a stock element of disengagement programs, and this, along with literacy classes, was the most well-received component.[164] This observation suggests that individualized treatment is an innovation for DDR programming, which typically operates at a political level and on a larger scale than violent extremist disengagement. From this evidence, it appears that the psychosocial component functions as the basis for other components: in the words of one client, "If not for the psychosocial support, I don't think I will have a rest of mind to learn the tailoring work." Moreover, this component was also judged to be a prerequisite to social acceptance on the part of communities.[165]

Previously, program graduates were reintegrated into their community of origin, but now integration can be

> **According to several reports . . . the risk assessment process is marred by abuse of some detainees and by poor recordkeeping. The screening and vetting process has been criticized for being opaque and lacking oversight.**

into a different community if the place of origin is reluctant to accept graduates or is outside full government control.[166] OSC is technically not responsible for the reintegration phase, which falls to state governments and other federal bodies, though OSC does preparatory work by liaising with stakeholders and working out modalities for transfer and subsequent reintegration, including tracing relatives and (from mid-2019) inviting them to Mallam Sidi.[167] To build confidence in the program, OSC also encourages stakeholders such as traditional rulers and religious leaders to visit the camp and interact with the clients, and OSC officials in turn visit communities, not only to promote the program but also to identify community projects that OSC and its graduates can support and to monitor progress.[168] Both psychosocial support and business development support (managed by the IOM) are part of the aftercare package.[169] An independent evaluation found that these initiatives were successful in increasing public confidence in the OSC program.[170]

Although OSC cohorts are technically volunteers, those detained through military operations are likely to choose OSC when the alternative is military detention in harsh conditions, such as at the Giwa facility, which has attracted significant criticism for human rights abuses. According to officials implementing the program, surrendering militants are screened and triaged by a multiagency team of investigators in Maiduguri comprising representatives of military, police, and security agencies and Ministry of Justice officials; screening includes input from civilian leaders and the Civilian Joint Task Force and is conducted under the supervision of the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime.[171] Western officials involved in supporting the programs added that military and security officials interview each detainee at Giwa to assess criteria, including motivation for joining, beliefs, activities

performed, family background, and place of origin, then categorize detainees as deeply engaged or "active perpetrators" (high risk, and generally thereafter treated in the criminal justice system); peripheral or "nonactive perpetrators," such as individuals who provided services for Boko Haram (low risk, and prime candidates for the OSC program); and "victims of circumstance," who should be immediately released.[172] Experts from the IOM developed the OSC's risk assessment tool, and a detailed, individualized assessment is conducted after detainee transfer to the OSC facility at Mallam Sidi.

According to several reports, however, the risk assessment process is marred by abuse of some detainees and by poor recordkeeping.[173] The screening and vetting process has been criticized for being opaque and lacking oversight, with one Western consultant quoted as saying it is unclear "how the military sorts who is kept in detention, who gets sent to trial, and who is sent to Gombe [the main OSC facility]."[174] But even if OSC is accurately targeted at lower-risk Boko Haram members and supporters, allocating higher-risk cases to the criminal justice system lowers the bar for the effectiveness of OSC as cohorts of less committed individuals will require less disengagement.

Donors have "significant concerns" about the conduct and conditions of OSC, responding in part to a series of critical reports. A study for the United Nations University found OSC to be "riddled with problems and challenges," such as imprecise criteria for selection, an overemphasis on religious instruction, and, crucially, difficulties in "reinsertion and reintegration" of the program's beneficiaries.[175] Amnesty International's May 2020 report "'We Dried Our Tears'" found that many OSC beneficiaries were

being held for up to 19 months in what amounted to unlawful detention and were exposed to unsafe conditions; of 15 graduates interviewed, only 2 said they had received livelihood support.[176] Reacting to the report, the UK government expressed concerns about "the process for screening participants, the conditions in which they are detained and the timeline for rehabilitation."[177] Drawing on interviews with OSC graduates in 2020, the International Crisis Group has reported deaths due to malnutrition in Mallam Sidi, in addition to much harsher conditions at Giwa, where many are initially processed.[178]

Donor interviews indicated support for moving OSC to civilian control and for it to become a fully voluntary program (rather than a means to deal with a vast number of military detainees).[179] OSC also ceased some vocational activities in response to published criticism, and the IOM commissioned an improvement plan and independent monitoring of the Mallam Sidi camp's medical facilities.[180] OSC leaders say they are speeding up processing and transfers and are training soldiers to ensure they treat defectors and civilians humanely.[181]

Nigeria's prison disengagement program was implemented by local and national teams working with the prison authorities, and a four-stage process was developed: engagement (trust-building with beneficiaries), risk assessment, needs assessment, and response. All interventions were designed to help beneficiaries meet their needs and develop pro-social attitudes and behaviors. The interventions comprised seven activities (motivational interviewing, vocational training and work experience, educational and cultural activities, art therapy, sports and games, religious intervention, and psychological and counseling interventions) organized into a weekly timetable of activities and led by vetted imams, pastors, teachers, instructors, therapists, psychologists, and medical personnel.[182]

Participation is voluntary, but the prospect of a reduced sentence is a powerful incentive. Government officials had observed a high participation rate, but one respondent added that in the early days of the program, some individuals were unwilling to engage.[183] There is a degree of centralization and coordination—a central program management office oversees the implementation by an interdisciplinary team in each location.[184] Activities commence after an assessment of each individual's history of violence, which yields a risk rating on a 1–5 scale that is reviewed quarterly, and particular attention is paid to what one participant called "moral behavior."[185] Nigerian Correctional Service (NCS) officers implementing the program are trained in handling violent extremist offenders, in motivational interviewing, and in critical thinking to help beneficiaries in "managing [their] conditioning."[186] The program also relies on a cadre of specialists, including social welfare officers (who assess individuals' material and family problems, seek to identify solutions, and build trust), psychologists (who conduct individual and group sessions, including counseling those who are suffering from mental illness), teachers (who not only teach but also emphasize the importance of education), and religious counselors (who conduct group sessions, including ones that directly address Boko Haram's ideology). In addition, there are recreational activities (dependent on resources and availability) and vocational training in such trades as tailoring, carpentry, welding, electrical work, shoemaking, and confectionary. Selection of trades and allocation of beneficiaries are subject to employability and needs assessments.[187] In part because of the length of sentences (and the long waiting times for court decisions), very few individuals have graduated from the program and been reintegrated, although the program includes post-release monitoring and aftercare (such as welfare visits and ongoing livelihood support in tandem with communities), as well as liaison with communities identified for reintegration. However, one respondent pointed to a lack of resourcing for reintegration, leading to an overreliance on the NCS After-Care Services Unit.[188]

The program is relatively new, and around 50 to 60 individuals had graduated as of April 2021. Recidivism rates

are reportedly very low (one reported case).[189] Officials report that the program is still working on its success metrics, with the current view being that a client who consistently receives a low rating on the five-point scale over multiple years should be considered as having passed.[190] Some respondents also highlighted significant barriers to effectiveness. One emphasized the lack of resources and limited support from the federal government, and noted the absence of a government-wide strategy for reintegration. Stigmatization of graduates was also reported as a major barrier to reintegration.

However, officials and international organizations supporting the program reported promising interim results, including enrollment of three clients in university courses, conspicuous success in vocational training, decreased tension and increased compliance in prisons, and positive behavioral changes (one respondent saw a former Boko Haram supporter engage willingly with a female Christian psychologist, for example). One respondent said, "We can see their level of radicalization being reduced."[191]

Implications of the Case Studies

Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria offer three varied cases of how former violent extremists can be subjected to disengagement and reintegration interventions and some of the obstacles that might prevent programs from being effective. Programs range from a strategic, top-down government intervention in Nigeria to community-led initiatives in northeastern Syria and UN-driven programs in Iraq. Northeastern Syria and Iraq have been dealing predominantly with ISIS, while Nigeria has focused on Boko Haram. It may seem, therefore, that the three cases are so dissimilar as to make comparison and general conclusions impossible. However, this study's analytical approach provides a framework to compare and contrast the cases in four dimensions: the context for disengagement and reintegration, the populations targeted for interventions, the interventions' planned and unplanned outcomes, and the mechanisms that potentially achieve change.

COMPARISON OF CONTEXTS

The three locations examined in the case studies offer instructive points of similarity and difference. All three are characterized by high levels of insecurity deriving not only from Islamist violent extremists but also from the activities of a range of state and nonstate actors. Four years after ISIS's territorial defeat, Iraq and northeastern Syria are still dealing with violence from the group's remnants; while in 2021, northeastern Nigeria saw an upsurge in violence from Boko Haram and Islamic State–West Africa Province, along with significant violent criminality.[192] State security forces in the three locations studied are often indiscriminate in their use of force, while proxy militias supplement—or have effectively supplanted—state armies. Armies suffer from severe underresourcing owing to the parlous state of the national or local economies and

corruption. Endemic violence, general insecurity, and weak state capacity combine to create inhospitable environments for disengagement and reintegration. Implementers of disengagement interventions have to contend with underresourced facilities, lack of access to expertise (such as mental health specialists), and physical threats. For reintegration, the problems are even more acute: some communities are so insecure that they cannot become reintegrating milieus, while unemployment and depressed economies provide limited livelihood opportunities for reintegrating former extremists.

The differences are as illuminating as the similarities. Nigeria is a lower-middle-income country with a federal system of governance and significant geographic, ethnic, and religious fault lines; 2015 witnessed the country's first peaceful transfer of power between parties since independence, but Nigerian politics are contentious and divide along religious and ethnic lines.[193] Syria is divided into zones of competing control, with the Damascus-based Assad regime controlling over two-thirds of the country and parts of the north and northwest controlled by Turkish-backed militias and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist organization, so that only the SDC/SDF-controlled northeast is conducive for disengagement and reintegration.[194] While tribal confederations span the border between eastern Syria and western Iraq, the political character of northeastern Syria and Iraq differ markedly: Iraq is theoretically sovereign and democratic, but experiences semi-authoritarian tendencies and strong influences from Iran, while AANES claims to be attempting an experimental form of participative governance yet is politically unrecognized and subject to significant military and political pressure.

People line up for food being distributed with military oversight in Borno State, Nigeria, on February 11, 2017. (Photo by Ashley Gilbertson/New York Times)

For disengagement and reintegration, the economic, political, and social conditions in each country constrain what can be achieved and how. Despite the ongoing conflict in the North East, Nigeria enjoys relative stability, which partly accounts for the maturity and growing scale of its flagship disengagement program. Significantly, OSC is in many ways a continuation of the NSC, which was developed by the previous administration, a succession pointing to the underlying degree of consensus within Nigeria that the Boko Haram insurgency cannot be defeated militarily. Nevertheless, political pressures have affected the conduct of OSC, which in its early phases struggled to achieve support from some communities and still faces criticism (including some that is politically motivated). In addition, lack of institutional capacity constrains the effectiveness of both OSC and the complementary prisons program.

The case of Iraq illustrates how politics at the local, regional, and national levels constrain whether disengagement and reintegration of former violent extremists can even be attempted. Apart from earlier attempts at "coercive rehabilitation" (which appear to have been discontinued), Iraq's federal government has eschewed disengagement and reintegration for anyone considered to have been directly implicated in ISIS in favor of cursory justice and punishment, including execution. However, Iraq's punitive approach is broadly in line with community sentiment: although there is some significant geographic and ethno-sectarian variation, many communities balk at accommodating those perceived to have been associated with ISIS, let alone former members and supporters. Only in the relatively autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is there anything approaching disengagement aimed at achieving behavioral change.

The existence of disengagement and rehabilitation interventions in northeastern Syria and their absence from the rest of the country demonstrates the extent to which context determines what can be attempted or achieved. By the same token, however, there is a widespread realization that a change in governance of this region—such as a return to regime control—would probably remove the conditions under which interventions are possible. In addition, the area's anomalous status limits its access to donor and political support, thereby limiting the scale and extent of interventions. Moreover, even if disengagement interventions were successful in northeastern Syria, that does not mean that reintegration would be possible for those from regime- or HTS-held parts of the country. These constraints underline the importance of disaggregating desired outcomes: disengagement and reintegration are obviously different end points, and each is likely to be more achievable in some areas than in others.

The situation in northeastern Syria also illustrates the importance of setting, the immediate environment in which disengagement and rehabilitation are to take place. The area's prisons and displacement camps are characterized by weak governance, scarce resources (human and material), economic dislocation, violence, and general instability. Added to these deficits is the lack of control that the authorities and implementing partners have over the environment, as well as their lack of influence over prospects for individuals. This means that the structures of incentives for behavioral change that are available in more stable settings are not available in locations like Syria.

Because of the obstacles in conflict-affected settings to effecting even the most basic components of disengagement (such as separating high-risk and low-risk cases), the first priority for governments, donors, and implementers must be to identify ways of reducing those obstacles or of changing the setting entirely. Conducting sensitive psychological or social interventions in

locations like al-Hol is simply too challenging in the current circumstances there, so the SDF's decision to relocate individuals to slightly more controlled settings is necessary and important but may not be sufficient. Repatriation of foreigners is an obvious and necessary mitigation factor, and the refusal of many governments to countenance repatriation for all but the lowest-risk cases is neither sensible nor sustainable.

IDENTIFICATION OF TARGET POPULATIONS

Which populations should be the target of disengagement and reintegration might seem an obvious question. But as these case studies show, the obvious answer—members and former members of violent extremist groups—is neither accurate nor precise.

Nigeria's OSC program underscores the potential gap between theory and practice in targeting interventions toward specific populations. The government's 2015 vision for the NSC was an approach that was both comprehensive and targeted: comprehensive in terms of addressing risk categories from the lowest to the highest and targeted in terms of developing interventions specific to the categorization. Some of this rigor is still evident in the current approach, with OSC intended for lower-risk cases—cadre members and supporters, but not leaders or active fighters—and the prisons program intended for those judged to meet the threshold for prosecution. However, in its application, OSC appears to be drawing in a very high proportion of people outside its target group, with one study claiming that at least three-quarters of the program's intake comprised not Boko Haram members but civilians caught up in military operations.[195] Whether the true figure is that high (and the evidence behind it appears somewhat anecdotal), this study and others agree that OSC has been fairly indiscriminate in its targeting, despite the use of screening, triage, and risk assessment with psychometric instruments. The blurred line between military operations and criminal justice responses has also contributed. That OSC was considered to be appropriate for 97

> **There is an implicit hierarchy of child populations . . . because of who they are rather than what they have done. Differentiating populations may be necessary for effective interventions, but it can also be discriminatory in ways that have grave consequences.**

former suspects judged to be legally innocent following the mass trials at Wawa in 2017–2018 further demonstrates that it is being used for purposes beyond disengagement. Nigeria's prisons program, which is more precisely targeted at higher-risk cases, introduced good practices from Western settings in the form of risk assessment and structured professional judgment techniques. However, the prisons program suffers from the more pervasive limitations of Nigeria's criminal justice system: because of the long delays in the justice process, most of the program's clients are awaiting trial, which gives them a powerful incentive to participate but also means that their actual culpability is unproven.

Whereas OSC suggests that interventions can be misdirected at broader populations, the Iraq case shows that disengagement and reintegration programs can also be deliberately targeted toward populations that have not been directly involved in violent extremism. The population of former fighters and supporters in Iraq has largely been disregarded for disengagement and reintegration efforts: formerly active members are imprisoned or executed, and this report did not uncover any evidence of prison-based disengagement interventions planned or delivered by or with the federal government. The well-documented ISIS child-soldier phenomenon has led to interventions in both the KRI and northeastern Syria. In this population, victims and perpetrators are not always distinguishable, and that has important consequences for disengagement and reintegration: should they be treated as perpetrators (which in Iraq would involve cursory trial and punishment) or as victims? If the latter, do they require disengagement and rehabilitation treatments, given their exposure to ISIS propaganda and activities? Yazidi children in the KRI are being treated as victims needing rehabilitation, partly because of the

particular suffering borne by this specific population. But there is an implicit hierarchy of child populations, with some children judged to be more perpetrator than victim, and hence eligible for criminal sanction rather than rehabilitation, because of who they are rather than what they have done. Differentiating populations may be necessary for effective interventions, but it can also be discriminatory in ways that have grave consequences for those concerned.

Although those judged to have committed crimes are largely beyond the reach of disengagement and reintegration interventions, UN agencies and CSOs have demonstrated that it is possible to approach populations of concern—that is, individuals and families who have been perceived to be affiliated with ISIS (and who may therefore be stigmatized rather than actually affiliated). Responding to political and social attitudes in Iraq, the UN has selectively categorized populations into "participants" and "beneficiaries," and then into women, children, former associates, families of perceived affiliation, and so on.

Some of the same issues are evident in northeastern Syria, which similarly is contending with the legacy of ISIS's reign of terror and associated stigmatization. Partly because of different governance and social dynamics, however, there is greater scope for a nonretributive response, with interventions targeting children and female members, supporters, or associates. The reported co-option of former ISIS members into the armed forces and the civilian administration, meanwhile, is not a disengagement intervention as such but suggests a greater willingness to accept that people can change allegiance and behavior.

Insofar as the majority of the populations of interest are officially IDPs or refugees and are not subject to

Iraqi soldiers patrol in northern Iraq on April 3, 2019. Iraq's approach to ISIS supporters and sympathizers has been to regard them as terrorists, regardless of their actual histories, and subject them to harsh punishments. Underpinning this approach is a view of ISIS as both an ideological and a security or military threat. (Photo by Felipe Dana/AP)

criminal process, there are obvious limits to what can be done without their consent. Even separating populations within a location such as an IDP camp may be problematic, and restrictions on liberty have been criticized by observers. In the absence of robust criminal justice systems enjoying international legitimacy, interventions in refugee or IDP camps will need to be limited to volunteer participants. Moving individuals to more conducive locations (e.g., third countries) will also need to be voluntary, and may be problematic in other ways.

DIVERSE OUTCOMES

How to describe the process of disengagement and its outcomes remains a source of confusion. The widespread use of such terms as deradicalization, disengagement, desistance, demobilization, rehabilitation, reintegration, reinsertion, and reconciliation

suggests a lack of conceptual focus and a need for clarification. However, as the case studies show, interventions differ in their intended outcomes: some are directed toward social reintegration and hence focus as much on the community as on the individual, while others aim at achieving either attitudinal or behavioral change of individual subjects.

It is also clear that specific programs may seek to achieve multiple and sometimes wide-ranging outcomes. Nigeria's OSC, for example, seeks to persuade members of Boko Haram to surrender and aims to change attitudes as well as behaviors. It also appears to have undeclared outcomes, notably managing large numbers of military detainees following operations in the North East. However, partly because it has failed to accurately

target the intervention, it has had more success as a rehabilitation program for those who have been displaced or victimized by Boko Haram or stigmatized by society: OSC graduates are received more positively than if they had not gone through the program.[196] And while reintegration is not the program's primary responsibility, in response to earlier criticisms OSC has begun to invest more resources in aftercare activities and in preparing communities.

In contrast, interventions in northeastern Syria have mostly avoided overtly ideological approaches, and practitioners were wary of describing them as deradicalization initiatives. This implies that practitioners and donors have developed a more nuanced awareness of the multifactorial nature of recruitment and mobilization into violent extremist groups than in other contexts and recognize the circumstantial nature of many people's journeys into these groups. And although the interventions in northeastern Syria discussed earlier do not target the highest-risk cases, they demonstrate an appreciation both of the needs of the participants and of the risks they pose.

In the Iraq case, there is also evidence of UN agencies differentiating intended outcomes into "reconciliation," "reintegration," and "resilience," although these terms are somewhat vague, and the intended outcomes are not described in much detail and lack an intervention logic or theory of change.[197] But what all these terms have in common is their orientation to the community—which seems to be the focus of the UN's strategy in Iraq. The UN strategy explicitly avoids discussing disengagement. As in other cases, fragile and conflict-affected settings demand greater attention to the reintegrating context and less focus on disengaging former violent extremists. Reintegration therefore requires a more comprehensive response than implementing a disengagement program. For those reintegrating, there is a hierarchy of needs, from the most basic—food, shelter, and safety—to mental health care and legal support. At the same time, there will be community expectations (of program graduates' behavior and commitment) and government and local authority requirements to be met. Success is likely to depend on matching all these needs, expectations, and requirements.

The heavy-handed and punitive response of the Iraqi federal government to an undeniably challenging set of post-ISIS problems appears to have left little space for others—international NGOs, CSOs, and international donors and implementers—to develop more targeted and equitable responses. However, these implementers and donors are doing what they can with those populations that have not been subjected to criminal sanctions. This observation suggests that, in some fragile and conflict-affected settings, disengagement and reintegration will need to take place with the firm support of the national government and local authorities, or after they have engaged. However, it also limits the scope of these interventions: in Iraq, for example, the prison population appears beyond the reach of international actors.

In all three study cases, stigma, rather than violent extremist belief and behavior, emerges as a significant barrier to reintegration. Stigma affects not only individuals who were affiliated with a violent extremist group but also victims of violent extremism. The mere fact of being apprehended by the armed forces in Nigeria can be enough to create perceptions of guilt by association, while the persistent and widespread discrimination against those who lived within ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq is well-documented. In such circumstances, the actual changes in behavior and attitudes created by a disengagement intervention are less relevant than how those emerging from the intervention are perceived by communities. Destigmatization of target populations becomes, therefore, as important an objective for disengagement and reintegration programs as disengagement itself.

ASSESSMENT OF MECHANISMS

The influence of context and setting, the diversity of populations, and the scope and variety of intended outcomes mean there is no single effective approach to disengagement and reintegration. Effectiveness is contingent on external factors and so is knowable only in relation to those factors. Many of the interventions discussed in the case studies are relatively new, and only the OSC program in Nigeria is sufficiently mature and well-documented to have been subjected to an independent evaluation. Even there, the conclusions that can be drawn are limited. And for interventions that, like the OSC program, adopt a range of activities, evaluators are challenged to isolate which components created an observed effect or determine whether the components worked synergistically in some combination.

The evidence of OSC's effectiveness suggests that the most individually targeted treatments, such as therapeutic counseling, have been the most effective in moderating attitudes and behavior. This observation is unsurprising and is broadly consistent with what is found with disengagement programs in more stable and higher-capacity environments, which are typically focused on the individual.[198] It also contrasts with DDR interventions, which historically have been directed toward larger cohorts through activities such as vocational training.[199] However, a coming challenge is the plan to scale up OSC to take in biannual cohorts of 600. Delivering interventions on this scale risks losing the individual focus, which appears to have been the program's most effective ingredient. There is concern on the part of some donors that OSC is too broad, too low-level, and too focused on solving the wrong problem (i.e., reducing the number of military detainees). More acutely, concerns about the legality and ethics of some of the program's vocational training activities are being taken seriously by donors and have led to the suspension of some activities. This shows that mechanisms need to be evaluated not just in terms of effectiveness but also whether they comply with accepted norms and legal standards.

In northeastern Syria, where several small-scale interventions have been attempted, activities have ranged from countering ideological positions through religious teaching to educational activities to promote pro-social values and training in life skills such as anger management and critical thinking. However, although one intervention took an avowedly ideological approach, most of these interventions avoided the "deradicalization" label and consequently did not focus on ideological challenge. Notably, several interventions in northeastern Syria were values oriented, working on the logic that values can be taught and, if accepted, can guide more pro-social behavior; however, it is also notable that the promoted values included ones that were clearly political, such as the Huri Center's focus on "democracy, peaceful coexistence and gender equality," an instance of political context influencing an intervention's mechanisms as well as outcomes. Other interventions focus more precisely on specific settings, as with a planned program for the al-Hol camp that seeks to separate more tractable individuals from the influence of committed ISIS cadres as a prelude to teaching a values-based curriculum. In the absence of an evaluation of any of these programs, it is impossible to judge their effect, though practitioners interviewed for this study noted the obvious limitations imposed by the security situation and by the lack of access to resources and expertise. Similarly, the SEED intervention in the KRI is too recent to have been evaluated, but its program logic identifies trauma counseling and value-complexity training (training tolerance of multiple individual and social identity values) as activities designed to encourage pro-social behavior in children and young people exposed to ISIS ideology and behavior.

In all three cases, there are significant challenges in terms of community perceptions of returnees and attitudes toward reintegration. However, perceptions vary within countries and over time. OSC in Nigeria initially faced significant challenges in social acceptance (including one early cohort being rejected by the target community); but

by 2020, communities were more accepting than before, and much more so than the graduates expected. This result shows that while the reintegration context might be challenging, it is not immovable, and interventions therefore can have a significant role in influencing the context: as opinion research in Iraq shows, the fact that someone has undergone a rehabilitation intervention can make community attitudes more favorable.[200]

Finally, the absence of a political and judicial framework for disengagement and reintegration leaves interventions in Syria and Iraq in particular isolated and short-term, and even positive results can lack sustainability and the wider legitimacy that would come from a politically mediated process of reconciliation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Interventions aimed at disengagement and reintegration in fragile or conflict-affected environments differ in their design and implementation from interventions undertaken in more stable settings. An unstable political and security environment means that programs in fragile settings are often underresourced, while federal and local institutions may be unresponsive or disengaged, and prospects for former extremists or those living in extremist-held territory may be limited. The last is especially important in the reintegration phase, for individuals approved for reintegration may find a lack of employment and educational opportunities, and receiving communities may be unwilling to accept them. For these reasons, policymakers and international organizations should take into account contextual factors when designing disengagement and reintegration programs, should target programs more precisely at specific cohorts, should be clearer about the desired outcomes, and should work with governing bodies and receiving communities in design and implementation. Specific recommendations structured according to context, population, outcome, and mechanism follow.

International actors should focus as much on improving conditions as on improving the interventions themselves. The political, social, and economic context for disengagement and reintegration, and the settings in which interventions take place, determine outcomes. Some contexts and settings are more conducive to disengagement and reintegration than others. A focus on improving conditions might mean supporting the improvement of political conditions (through transitional justice mechanisms or other approaches to reconciliation),

in addition to improving the material conditions in refugee or IDP camps, military cantonment facilities, prisons, and other settings for interventions. Prisons, particularly in Syria and Iraq, warrant greater attention from international policymakers, and national and local authorities need to grant access to researchers and officials.

The legal basis for interventions must be clear and uncontested. The legal and ethical issues surrounding disengagement and reintegration in interventional settings are substantial, especially for IDPs and refugees—people who fled violent settings and may be unable to return. Establishing legal safeguards should be handled at the federal level, with input from international organizations experienced in issues confronting displaced persons, such as the International Organization for Migration. Voluntary participation in treatments and choice of reintegration locale support a human rights focus in reintegration programs.

International actors should consider how best to relocate individuals to more conducive environments. Because many settings are extremely unconducive for disengagement and reintegration interventions, relocation may be in the best interests of the populations served. This is not to recommend that disengagement initiatives be conducted in third countries, as has been proposed, which would give rise to potentially insurmountable legal and logistical issues. Rather, the recommendation supports the lawful repatriation of foreigners in refugee and IDP camps in Syria and Iraq, and not only the well-known cases of "foreign terrorist fighters" and their families but also the thousands of Iraqis in camps

such as al-Hol. Those camps lack the capacity for disengagement interventions, so it is imperative to repatriate their occupants where possible. The positive experiences reported from Central Asia should encourage governments to take these steps.[201]

Donors need to ensure that interventions they support have appropriate processes for targeting, screening, and triage to ensure effective treatment (and to ensure that bystanders are not inappropriately caught up in disengagement and reintegration programs). Violent extremism in conditions of conflict is a different problem from terrorism in stable contexts. Violent extremism in conflict produces bigger and more varied populations that require intervention, and differentiating populations—victims or perpetrators, members or supporters, committed or coerced—may be more challenging. Treating the right populations is crucial to effectiveness and to the legality and legitimacy of disengagement and reintegration in conflict zones. Interventions that fail to treat their intended population category not only are likely to be ineffective on their own terms, they also are expected to contribute to wider conflict dynamics.

Where political conditions and social pressure make disengagement interventions all but impossible, it may be possible to intervene with actions that approach or are adjacent to populations of interest, such as the community reconciliation interventions that are being attempted by UN agencies and others in northern Iraq. In some cases, these interventions may be closer to preventing violent extremism than to supporting disengagement and reintegration, but they may contribute

to a broader outcome (as well as being potentially worthwhile in their own right).

For reintegration to be successful, community attitudes need to be comprehensively addressed, including by governments and local authorities. Community attitudes and perceptions are as important to the success of reintegration as the quality of disengagement and rehabilitation interventions. The necessity of achieving community acceptance also suggests that deradicalization is a potentially valid outcome—or at least perceived outcome—for programmatic interventions, alongside the more generally accepted outcomes of disengagement and reintegration.

Policymakers should give careful thought to which mechanisms will achieve what outcomes with a specific population in a specific location. Bringing people engaged in whatever way by violent extremism back into mainstream society requires varied and precisely targeted responses. The wide range of activities used in disengagement and reintegration programs and their associated intervention logics suggest that diverse mechanisms are available (e.g., cognitive mechanisms focusing on attitudes, pragmatic mechanisms to incentivize behavior change). Rather than choosing between ideology and behavior, policymakers designing disengagement and reintegration programs should recognize that different approaches may be needed for specific populations to achieve the desired outcomes. Moreover, the mechanisms should be sufficiently flexible to respond dynamically with increased understanding of the target group.

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199. For a valuable summary of the DDR field and its relevance to violent extremism, see Mary Beth Altier, "Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from over 30 Years of DDR," RESOLVE Network, March 2021, www.resolvenet.org/research/violent-extremist-disengagement-and-reintegration-lessons-over-30-years-ddr.

200. Kristen Kao and Mara R. Revkin, "Retribution or Reconciliation? Post-Conflict Attitudes toward Enemy Collaborators," *American Journal of Political Science*, November 2, 2021.

201. See William B. Farrell et al., "Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq," Special Report no. 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 21, 2021, www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/processes-reintegrating-central-asian-returnees-syria-and-iraq.

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This report examines how disengagement and reintegration of violent extremists are being attempted in fragile and conflict-affected places. Drawing on existing research into disengagement and reintegration and on new primary research conducted in three case study countries (Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria), the report underscores that disengaging and reintegrating former violent extremists in conflict conditions is not only fundamentally different from doing so in conditions of stability, it is in many ways much more challenging. The report therefore proposes that policymakers and practitioners should think differently about disengagement in unstable contexts and recognize that what can be achieved and how are determined by where the program is taking place and whom it is targeting. The analysis and recommendations address four dimensions: context, targeted populations, planned and unplanned outcomes, and the mechanisms that potentially achieve change.

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