

Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)

Joint Staff/J39

Assessment of Strategic Implications of Population Dynamics in the Central Region

Integration Report: Radicalization

Research Team Reports

Available at <https://nsiteam.com/sma-publications/>

- Cooley, A., Cooley, S., Hinck, R., & Kitsch, S. (February 2020). **Child's play: Cooperative games as tools of deradicalization.** Oklahoma State University & Monmouth College [Report](#)
- Dorondo, D. (March 2020). **Lessons from Nazi deradicalization.** Western Carolina University [Report](#).
- Dorondo, D. (March 2020). **Post-Brexit EU2 + 1 and the UN vs. a US-led Coalition of the Willing.** Western Carolina University [Report](#).
- Ferguson, N. (9 December 2019). SMA panel discussion entitled, "UK Perspectives on Deradicalization." SMA [Presentation](#).
- Jafri, A., (March 2020). **Summary of previous radicalization work.** NSI, Inc. [Report](#).
- Kaltenthaler, K. & Kruglanski, A. (February 2020). **Preventing Radicalization among Internally Displaced People in Syria and Iraq.** University of Akron & University of Maryland [Report](#).
- Kuznar, L., Jafri, A., & Kuznar, E. (February 2020). **Dealing with radicalization in IDP camps.** NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Lee, H. & Donahue, J. (March 2020); TRADOC G-2 Modeling & Simulation Directorate. **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia futures study with an assessment of Syrian refugee camp radicalization dynamics.** TRADOC G-2 [Report](#).
- Peterson, N., Astorino-Courtois, A., & Kuznar, L. (February 2020). **Defying the cycle of violence among children of war.** NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Polansky, S. & Aviles, W. (February 2020). **Reintegrating the radicalized: Challenges, lessons learned, and how to overcome barriers.** NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Popp, G., Canna, S. & Day, J. (February 2020). **Common characteristics of "successful" deradicalization programs of the past.** NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Rieger, T. & Goncharova, A. (February 2020). **Responsibility for displaced civilians and effective voices for preventing radicalization.** NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Suedfeld, P., Grunert, L., & Morrison, B. (February 2020). **Deradicalization in history and psychology: A selective review of the literature.** University of British Columbia [Report](#).
- Wright, N. D. (February 2020). **Affording new futures: The neuroscience and cognition of reintegration and reconciliation.** Intelligent Biology [Report](#).
- Wright, N. D. (February 2020). **Young people aged 0-17: Neuroscience and cognition to break cycles of radicalization.** Intelligent Biology [Report](#).

March 2020

Integration Report Author: Sabrina Polansky, PhD, spolansky@NSIteam.com

Series Editors: Sarah Canna, scanna@NSIteam.com, and George Popp, gpopp@NSIteam.com

Integration Report: Radicalization

At the request of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), SMA initiated a study to understand the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region. The effort examined drivers of instability in the region emerging from radicalization, great power competition, state-level instability, and black swan scenarios. This report integrates the research conducted by the teams listed on the front cover in response to USCENTCOM's questions about radicalization, reintegration, and reconciliation. This report is intended to be a succinct, easily navigable representation of the exceptional work by the collective team. Please click on the links embedded on the cover page to go directly to the research reports.

Bottom Lines Up Front

- This series of USCENTCOM questions¹ is largely oriented around processes of radicalization and deradicalization, which focus on deeply held beliefs. However, several studies suggested that a similar or greater emphasis on behavior (e.g., disengagement) may be a more practical goal in the short term.
- The questions also assume a reliable base of generalizable findings exists for deradicalization and reintegration programs, from which lessons learned can be derived and applied across a variety of contexts. This in turn presupposes effective assessments are in place using reliable metrics to determine each program's degree of success. Yet the research base is both narrow and largely based on Western populations, which limits generalizability.
- Moreover, while there are some common components to programs generally thought to be successful, there is no one size fits all solution for deradicalization, reintegration, and reconciliation program design. Instead, programs should be tailored to the specifics of the context and target populations in question.
- Additionally, approaches should be both multi-level (e.g., addressing the needs of both individuals and communities) and harness the inputs of multiple organizations (e.g., taking a whole of government approach, working with US partners and local entities).
- Solutions also require both short *and* long time horizons. As an example of the latter, overcoming years of trauma and shifting people's outlook on life in order to effect behavioral and especially attitudinal change are long-term processes and require sustained follow-up, including after-care.
- The research conducted for this effort suggests that addressing the root causes of trauma and recruitment to violent extremism, rather than taking a reactive approach, is the best long-term solution for breaking the cycle of radicalization. Nonetheless, several effective and impactful measures can be taken in the short term by, for example, drawing on insights from other fields to inform development of relatively low cost interventions that can be scaled to the resource environment (e.g., low or medium).

¹ USCENTCOM Questions:

[B1] How can we break the cycle of radicalization, particularly with children who know no other social system/model of governance? Are there possible graduated steps to deradicalization (i.e., judicial efforts, penal efforts, religious efforts, familial efforts, treatment efforts) that can be applied?

[B2] Are there examples of successful deradicalization in history that we can draw lessons from?

[B3] Where does ownership of this problem (weaponization of IDPs and refugees) reside—internationally, interagency? What is the military's role? What would be the most effective voice to promote de-radicalization?

[B4] How do you reintegrate radicalized people back into society? Both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have centers focused on this problem. What should the international community do with people who cannot be reintegrated into society? Are there lessons from other regions on reintegration and reconciliation that could be applied to the Central Region?

[B5] How do you protect an at-risk population from extremism in an IDP/refugee camp? How do you build community resilience to help prevent radicalization? How do you triage and segregate persons in IDP/refugee camps that have varying degrees of radicalization?

Underlying Themes

The broad set of topics and vital points covered in the rich contributing research on radicalization, reintegration, and reconciliation cannot be fully captured here. However, reviewing the collective team’s work revealed several underlying (and thus not always directly highlighted) themes that emerged across this combined body of work.

Box 1: A strategy of “significance” and its practical next steps

By Nick D. Wright, PhD, Intelligent Biology

What can USCENTCOM’s *strategy* be for this seemingly intractable challenge? Sir Lawrence Freedman’s magisterial book *On Strategy* (2013) describes how:

As a practical matter strategy is best understood modestly, as moving to the next stage rather than to a definitive or permanent conclusion. The next stage is one that can be realistically reached from the current stage. ... This does not mean it is easy to manage without a view of a desired end state. Without some sense of where the journey should be leading.

Thus, for USCENTCOM, we propose a strategy with two complementary parts: an end-goal of “providing significance”; and a practical, graduated, cost-effective, evidence-based hierarchy of actions to achieve it (e.g., the modified Lancet program described below). That is:

- **The strategy’s end goal can be to empower the IDPs and refugees to help them gain "significance."** Afford them opportunities to achieve dignity and give them voice. USCENTCOM interacts in countless ways with regional populations—and at some level they could ALL contribute to this compelling underlying goal of empowerment and significance. But whilst this goal provides a destination—and does so at a very human level—we must also describe the next steps on the road to get there.
- **Practical next steps towards that end-goal can involve a graduated, cost-effective, evidence-based hierarchy of actions** (e.g., a modified version of the Lancet Global Mental Health Program) (Patel et al., 2018; see Wright, a). Such a systematic program can start with cost-effective interventions requiring limited expert involvement, so that it provides plausible and evidence-based next steps.

Theme 1: Look at changing behavior, as well as attitudes

The USCENTCOM questions largely, though not exclusively, focus on exploring processes of radicalization and deradicalization—both of which invoke individuals’ attitudes or beliefs. Yet attitudes linked to radicalization can be difficult to reliably measure and difficult to change (Peterson, Astorino-Courtois, & Kuznar; Kuznar, Jafri, & Kuznar). Four related issues merit consideration. First, not all individuals espousing radical beliefs are destined to engage in violent behavior to support these beliefs (Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski; Peterson et al.). Second, not all individuals engaging in violence are motivated by radical beliefs (Peterson et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Wright, a). Given these first two issues, expending limited resources on broad-based targeting of individuals with radical beliefs may be inadvisable. Third, deradicalization may not be necessary for effective disengagement; Northern Ireland presents a key historical example of a peace process where disengagement was achieved without complete deradicalization of ex-combatants (Ferguson; Wright, a). Finally, psychological studies on cognitive dissonance demonstrate that attitudes can come into alignment with behaviors when people experience the uncomfortable state that occurs when two strongly held attitudes or an attitude and behavior are inconsistent with one another. To reduce this dissonance, people will be (unconsciously) motivated to change either the behavior or attitude to come into alignment with the other. In this way, beliefs can follow behaviors (Wright, a). For example, an individual disengaging from violence (behavior) but maintaining support for violence as a means

for resolving political problems (attitude) may, if his (or her) behavior persists, become less psychologically committed to that attitude, in turn solidifying and perpetuating the new behavior (Suedfeld, Grunert, & Morrison).²

Shaping behavior—namely, disengagement—may also be a more practical goal in the short term, and perhaps should be the primary aim as it more immediately reduces conflict and violence (Kuznar et al.; Popp, Canna, & Day; Wright, a). Nonetheless, extreme beliefs continue to matter as they can potentiate individuals' involvement in violent extremist behavior (Wright, a). Even non-violent radicalized individuals may pose a threat if they radicalize others, offer passive support to the extremist cause, or otherwise enable others' violence in service of the cause (Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski). Long-lasting behavioral change may also be more likely if preceded by deradicalization, which invokes psychological changes in the areas of cognition, emotion, motivation, and values (Polansky & Aviles; Suedfeld et al.). Such changes invoke internalization of norms and associated attitudes that are incompatible with using violence to achieve political ends. This internalization (versus mere compliance) will generally lead to longer-term changes that are less susceptible to external factors (Suedfeld et al.). If the ultimate goal is reintegration, then some degree of deradicalization may also be necessary (Suedfeld et al.). Interventions and their associated assessments therefore should focus on both beliefs *and* behaviors, mirroring the most comprehensive programs (Suedfeld et al.; Wright, a).

Theme 2: Better program assessments are needed

Reliable and generalizable empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of deradicalization or reintegration programs—either for children or adults—is limited. This is due in part to the lack of appropriate assessment for existing programs (Peterson et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Suedfeld et al.).³ Moreover, program details are often kept opaque and governments may fail to divulge information about the success or failure of such programs (Peterson et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Popp et al.). Besides being narrow, the research base is also largely centered on Western populations, which may limit generalizability (Kuznar et al.; Polansky & Aviles). The theoretical bases of these programs are also limited; while several theoretical frameworks explain radicalization, theoretical work on deradicalization is less robust and no comprehensive theory of deradicalization for adults or children exists (Cooley, Cooley, Hinck, & Kitsch; Peterson et al.).

How do we best define and measure the success of these programs? USCENTCOM need not reinvent the wheel—practical approaches already exist and inspiration can also be drawn from other fields. To begin, USCENTCOM can emphasize the need for proper evaluation, so that programs incorporate appropriate methods for doing so. Assessments should be guided by a clear articulation of what problem the program is intended to solve (e.g., changing “hearts and minds” and/or changing behavior) (Suedfeld et al.), accompanied by a clear statement of the specific program goal (e.g., reintegration).⁴ Other key questions include the length of research follow-up or law enforcement surveillance necessary before success can be declared and how specifically to define recidivism (short of re-engaging in terrorist acts) (Ibid). There is little consensus regarding whether recidivism is even an appropriate measure of success (Popp et al.). It is thus important to include other metrics, as well as examine predictive risk factors for recidivism including age, level of commitment, family ties, and socio-economic

² Social psychological theory indicates that minimizing the importance of the discrepancy is another possible way to reduce dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In the notional example here, the actor might rationalize his behavior to himself by noting that he is just biding time.

³ Assessment challenges are not limited to these programs, but are also seen, for example, in Influence, Inform, and Persuade programs (see, for example, Wright, 2019 or Paul, 2017).

⁴ Doing so requires having clear operational definitions for—and making distinctions among—related terms (e.g., deradicalization, counter-radicalization, anti-radicalization, demobilization, disengagement, reintegration), many of which are often used interchangeably (Kuznar, Jafri, & Kuznar; Polansky & Aviles; Suedfeld, Grunert, & Morrison).

considerations (Suedfeld et al.). Finally, institute basic principles of good design and measurement; these include the use of multiple measures of effectiveness and objective third-party assessments by individuals with appropriate training and backgrounds (Kuznar et al.; Suedfeld et al.).

Theme 3: There is no one size fits all approach to programs, so tailoring is key

It is also important that programs are aptly tailored to the specific context and culture in which they are being implemented (Jafri; Peterson et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Popp et al.; Suedfeld et al.; Wright, a, b). Even in cases of deradicalization, reintegration, and reconciliation programs that are broadly considered successful, a direct translation and application of these programs and their components to new contexts may be ineffective or ill-advised. This is due in large part to the difficulties with generalizing across cultures about programs (e.g., deradicalization) as well as generalizing across specific situations (Suedfeld et al.). As well as looking for lessons or components that might be universally applied, emphasis should be placed on deriving a menu of options for components and structures that have been associated with programs generally thought (or better yet, shown) to be successful. Programs (both intervention strategies and associated assessment procedures) can then be tailored using these and other elements to specific circumstances and contexts (physical, political, and social) within which a conflict has taken place and to which former combatants will return (Kuznar et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Suedfeld et al.). Tailoring of specific program elements (e.g., economic and educational opportunities) to the program participants involved may be similarly useful (Wright, a). Consideration should also be given to the nature of the conflict (Polansky & Aviles) as well as the factors that motivated individuals to become involved with or made them susceptible to violent extremist groups. These include factors ranging from ideological commitment and social influence to environmental conditions or a tendency toward low cognitive complexity and narrowing of considered perspectives (Cooley et al.; Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski; Peterson et al.; Suedfeld et al.). In the latter case, the focus is on how people think (cognitive structure) rather than what they think (cognitive content). An individual's belief in a cause may not change as a result of program participation, but can be integrated within a more flexible, open-minded, and tolerant perspective that is less likely to lead to violence (Suedfeld et al.).

Theme 4: Any solution should be multi-level and administered by multiple entities

The success of any intervention for reintegration and anti-, counter-, or deradicalization of extremists, internally displaced people (IDPs), or refugees will depend largely on ensuring a multi-level (individual, local community, state, and regional—along with cultural considerations) approach as well as involving target country-based (e.g., civil society and local organizations), US-based (e.g., USAID, State), and externally-based (e.g., allies, NGOs, charities) partners (Jafri, 2019; Kuznar et al.; Polansky & Aviles; Suedfeld et al.; Wright, b; Dorondo, b). While ultimate responsibility for foreign and local fighters may rest upon their country of origin and ultimate responsibility for IDPs and refugees may rest upon their host nation, poor and war-torn countries may lack the expertise, economic resources, and institutional capacity to develop and execute effective programs without the ongoing support of the United States, NGOs, the United Nations, and other agencies (Polansky & Aviles; Rieger & Goncharova; Dorondo, b). Social services and economic incentives alone are insufficient to prevent radicalization of at-risk populations such as refugees. Greater success at inoculating against radicalization is achieved if these services are paired with the provision of a “robust, competent, and ideologically compatible security force” and the resources distributed on a transactional or conditional basis (Lee & Donahue).

An integrated system of interventions addressing multiple social scales in turn can help inoculate individuals against radicalization and build community resilience to radicalization (Kuznar et al.).⁵ A key element in this vein is obtaining support from and providing support to the communities to which former radicals belong (Polansky et al.; Popp et al.; Rieger & Goncharova). This support can include providing counselling to those with a relationship to the target individuals (e.g., parents, teachers, friends, or employers), involving community members early in the reintegration process, and providing families and societies themselves with reintegrative assistance (Polansky & Aviles). Support to local communities is key to avoiding potential resentment if host communities feel they must compete with or are offered fewer resources than refugees, IDPs, or ex-combatants in deradicalization programs (Kuznar et al.; Rieger & Goncharova). Community outreach also helps to reduce the stigmatization of ex-combatants and their families, gives residents in IDP camps a sense of voice, agency, and empowerment, and underscores the links between the individual and the community—aiding in both reintegration and reconciliation (Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski; Polansky & Aviles). Similarly, the most promising deradicalization efforts may be those that “re-socialize” the sense of self in relation to the various environments and individuals encountered, revealing interdependencies among them (Cooley et al.).

Theme 5: Both a short-term solution and a longer-term solution including after-care and monitoring are necessary

Overcoming the great complexity of factors contributing to radicalization (or vulnerability to radicalization) across a wide variety of individuals with varying motivations, who moreover hail from and exist within varying contexts, is likely to require a long time horizon (Dorondo, personal communication; Peterson et al.; Wright, b). For example, overcoming years of trauma and shifting people’s outlook on life in order to effect behavioral and especially attitudinal change are long-term processes (Peterson et al.). Programs or approaches intended to be a “quick fix” without ongoing support are unlikely to enjoy sustainable success in meeting their objectives. Any solution offered should therefore aim to provide not only short-term solutions, but also make a long-term commitment to sustained after-care for program “graduates” in order to be optimally effective (Polansky & Aviles; Peterson et al.; Popp et al.). This includes providing support for individuals who are at greatest risk for falling back into old patterns of thinking and behavior, such as those returning to the contexts in which they were first radicalized (Suedfeld et al.). Monitoring is also important, though states might focus their monitoring efforts on the first year after individuals’ return—when the likelihood of violent action is most probable (Polansky & Aviles). Several effective and impactful measures can be taken in the short term by, for example, drawing on insights from other fields to inform development of interventions that can be scaled to the resource environment (e.g., low or medium) (Wright, b). For example, work in global mental health provides useful templates for the developing world that can be adapted for the current scenario and executed at relatively low cost (Wright, b). However, addressing the root causes of trauma and recruitment to violent extremism, rather than taking a reactive approach, is the best long-term solution (Peterson et al.).

Summary of Implications for the USG and USCENTCOM

Several summary implications for the US Government and USCENTCOM emerged from this set of studies:

- USCENTCOM should seek internal partnerships as part of a whole of government approach, as well as external partnerships, which are required to address the scale and breadth of issues invoked by radicalization.

⁵ In the case of IDP camps, the proper focus may be on ensuring camp population resiliency rather than on individual counter-radicalization efforts (Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski).

- Proper methods for program assessment should be incorporated into the design of any new programs.
- An appropriate and comprehensive understanding of culture, contextual conditions, the target population, and the nature of the conflict are critical to ensure that deradicalization, reintegration, and reconciliation programs are properly tailored for specific applications as well as implemented effectively.
- It is important to set up programs that take a multi-level approach—from the individual and community, to the state and regional. Cultural considerations should also play a role.
- The problem of radicalization is unlikely to be solved by a “quick fix” alone, and also requires a long-term commitment and commensurate strategy.
- In the short term, US agency and partner support should be directed toward solutions that emphasize disengagement.
- Longer-term solutions will require a sustained focus on deradicalization and providing after-care and services to ex-combatants and their families, as well as IDPs and refugees who may continue to suffer from trauma. However, effective, evidence-based interventions need not be expensive. Drawing on insights from other fields can help inform development of relatively low cost interventions that can be scaled to the resource environment.

Additional References

Festinger L. A (1957). *Theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, & Company.

Freedman, L. D. (2013). *Strategy: A History*. Oxford ; New York: OUP USA.

Paul, C. (2017). Assessing and Evaluating Department of Defense Efforts to Inform, Influence, and Persuade
Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR809z4.html

Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P., Chisholm, D., Collins, P. Y., Cooper, J. L., Eaton, J., Herrman, H., Herzallah, M. M., Huang, Y., Jordans, M. J. D., Kleinman, A., Medina-Mora, M. E., Morgan, E., Niaz, U., Omigbodun, O., ... Unützer, Jü. (2018). The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*, 392(10157), 1553–1598.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31612-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31612-X)

Wright, N. D. (2019). From control to influence: cognition in the gray zone. Retrieved from:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c646d66815512fdad0ed1d3/t/5c68324af9619a97a6c4fbd0/1550336338320/From+Control+to+Influence>