
It's About the Group, Not God: Social Causes and Cures for Terrorism

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Abstract:

This essay challenges assumptions about the root causes of jihadist terrorism that prioritize political, religious, or economic factors. Drawing on the author's anecdotal experience interviewing hundreds of accused jihadist terrorists, along with survey data collected from subject matter experts in countering violent extremism (CVE), the essay offers an interpretation for terrorism's causes and cures that emphasizes social factors. Contrary to narratives popular in the U.S. – both in media and government circles – the lure of terrorism is not a result of political marginalization, economic disadvantage, or even religious indoctrination. It is foremost a sociological phenomenon, created by individuals who seek the insulating security of group identity and affiliation. The real reason why people are drawn to join terrorist groups is the innate need for camaraderie, identity, and a sense of belonging – the pursuit of social satisfaction, not the expression of political or economic frustration, much less the fulfilment of a religious imperative. CVE research that exclusively focuses on the political, economic, or religious causes of terrorism will, at best, over-appraise their significance, and, at worst, distract policymakers from understanding more influential motivators and responding to them accordingly. New directions for research lie in further exploring the sociological underpinnings of jihadist terrorism, as well as validating the effectiveness of social-centred CVE policies already in place.

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Introduction

The premise of countering violent extremism (CVE) is to defeat terrorism at its roots by offering a precise understanding of terrorist motivations and predicting how those motivations practically manifest into terrorist violence. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes of the George Washington University's "Program on Extremism" offer a good working definition of CVE that may be informative here: "In substance," they write, "CVE constitutes an array of non-repressive initiatives that seek to address behaviours that could potentially lead to terrorism..."¹

In recent years, CVE has become an avant-garde academic discipline with an array of defenders and detractors.²

In the relatively demobilized Obama era, CVE has actually stolen some thunder from the military interventionist camp. U.S.-led regime change, nation-building, and counterinsurgency operations have been largely supplanted by scholarly meditations on terrorism's root causes, conferences designed to bridge the worlds of academia and policy, and diplomatic pressure on pertinent allies to take a more holistic approach to their own counterterrorism policies and procedures.³

To its credit, the Obama administration has opened new avenues for applying CVE research in the U.S., and new empirical conclusions about terrorist motivations are finding inroads to inform policy.⁴ Countering those motivations, it stands to reason, should be easier now with over a decade of hindsight looking at what drove terrorists to join and/or support their respective groups. Since 9/11, more professionals from the intelligence community, law enforcement, and academia have actually interacted with terrorists directly, and thus public discourse on terrorism's underlying and sustaining causes should start to reflect a more authentic narrative.⁵

Until now, however, that authentic narrative has been little more than a minority

report with a negligible effect on policy. Since 9/11, public discourse on terrorism's underlying causes has clung to premises of politics, economics, and religion. To counter terrorism's appeal, U.S. officials have expressed a need to eliminate a hazy combination of political disaffection, economic marginalization, and intolerant religious ideology. Officials have sought to deter a generation of would-be terrorists by changing authoritarian regimes into democracies, by opening commercial markets, and by pressuring religiously-conservative allies like Saudi Arabia to openly promote religious freedom and tolerance.⁶

Consider the following excerpts from President Bush between 2002 and 2006, speaking on his administration's strategy to fight extremism in the Middle East:

“Ultimately, the only way to defeat the terrorists is to defeat their dark vision of hatred and fear by offering the hopeful alternative of political freedom...”⁷

“Democracy and reform will make [Middle Eastern states] stronger and more stable, and make the world more secure by undermining terrorism at its source... If that region grows in democracy and prosperity and hope, the terrorist movement will lose its sponsors, lose its recruits, and lose the festering grievances that keep terrorists in business.”⁸

“We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world. The events of [9/11] taught us that... poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks...”⁹

“We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize

and try to turn to their advantage.”¹⁰

“The terrorism we confront today springs from: Political alienation... grievances that can be blamed on others... Subcultures of conspiracy... [and] an ideology that justifies murder...”¹¹

While President Obama, for his part, has been spuriously criticized for “refusing to call it ‘Islamic terrorism,’”¹² the political-economic explanation for terrorism still holds sway within his administration. Obama has spoken about the root causes of terrorism many times, most personally in May 2013, when he attributed terrorism’s popularity to issues of poverty, sectarianism, political repression, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹³ His administration’s 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) details a plan to “to address the underlying conditions that can help foster violent extremism such as poverty, inequality, and repression,” for which the NSS goes on to prescribe “greater economic opportunities for women and disaffected youth” as the solution.¹⁴

In October 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry said what is needed to counter extremism are “better alternatives for a whole bunch of young people who today live in places where they feel oppressed... [and where] they don’t have jobs.”¹⁵ Kerry has said that the solution to terrorism is “economic opportunity for marginalized youth,”¹⁶ and he has gone on record to blame the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria on poverty.¹⁷ In short, despite more than a decade of analytical experience in the War on Terror, the Obama administration seems to understand the root causes of terrorism in much the same way the Bush administration did. Politics and economics still carry the day.

For its part, the Fourth Estate is often just as complicit in over-estimating political, economic, and religious explanations for terrorist violence. Many journalists who have editorialized about ISIL’s appeal show a strong deference to these premises. Articles and

editorials published by mainstream U.S. news outlets, for example, consistently emphasize economic marginalization, political resentment, and Wahhabi indoctrination as reasons for ISIL's appeal. Preferred points of emphasis are poverty and unemployment, perceived anti-Muslim policies, and Saudi-financed proselytizing campaigns aimed at Muslim minorities in various Western countries.¹⁸

These points of emphasis by the media continue to portray economic, political, and religious agitation as likely tipping points – prerequisites even – in a budding terrorist's radicalization process. In turn, these points of emphasis contribute to an increasingly-mainstream perspective that Muslims in the West have no chance at economic success, no state-guaranteed freedom to practice their religion, no learned tolerance for religious pluralism, and thus no choice but to seek a solution to their existential crises in the Islamic State.

A Social Alternative

Although rhetorically popular for politicians and journalists of all persuasions, fixations on politics, economics, and religion as motivating conditions for terrorism have actually obscured the true nature of its appeal and sidetracked policies to counter it. Fortunately, however, professional interaction with terrorists themselves is leading to a more genuine narrative about why people seek refuge in terrorist groups. Quite simply, more people with an agenda to find out have actually asked terrorists themselves why they got involved in the first place. Since many intelligence professionals are disinclined to record their experiences (and thus unable to document the motivations of their former subjects), it is essential that we listen closely to professionals – including those from other fields – who have done just that.¹⁹ The experts referenced in this essay argue that terrorists actually derive very little motivation from political, economic, or religious grievances after all. By

and large, they contend, getting involved in terrorism is a process of socialization.²⁰

Psychologist John Horgan argues that terrorist groups are appealing because they offer a source of identity to people suffering from a profound, albeit natural identity crisis. He suggests that terrorists usually ascribe religious, political, and economic motives for their involvement after the fact, in a post hoc attempt to rationalize indefensible acts of violence. Why terrorists become involved initially, however, is because they seek meaning through group identity and participation.²¹

Anthropologist Scott Atran takes a similar position. In Atran's experience, jihadist terrorists are patently ordinary people whose involvement in terrorism can be attributed to peer-pressure and a desire to be part of an "in group" of some significance. Specific acts of violence – even self-sacrifice – are made easier when an individual feels his or her immediate social circle will benefit thereby. Atran portrays terrorist recruitment as a social transaction by which a new member might feel indebted to the group for bringing him into the fold. In turn, acts of terrorist violence are forms of repayment, aimed at pleasing and appeasing fellow members first and foremost. The cover of Atran's seminal work summarizes his position quite well: "Terrorists don't just kill and die for a cause, they kill and die for one another."²²

Psychiatrist Marc Sageman believes that within the individual terrorist life cycle, existing social relationships almost always predate a radicalization phase. Sageman reviewed the files of 172 self-styled jihadist terrorists for his 2004 book, and he later advanced his thesis by adding that terrorist groups have over time evolved into diffuse, decentralized, and relatively egalitarian networks of like-minded peers, whose formation is prompted by the shared trauma of their members and whose sustainment is traceable to the camaraderie that such a commonality arouses.²³ Sageman meticulously refutes the economic thesis, noting that the vast majority of jihadist terrorists whom he studied were fairly well-educated and well-to-do.²⁴

As one of very few actual sociologists making the social argument for terrorism's root causes, Stephen Vertigans devotes a good portion of his 2011 book to making the case for more such research. Vertigans offers a few additional insights not covered in great depth by Horgan, Atran, or Sageman. For example, Vertigans attributes terrorism's popularity to a well-crafted extremist narrative that dichotomizes the world and leaves only "with us" or "against us" options. Terrorist groups, Vertigans believes, place high value on trust exercises and rituals – practices that formalize membership, engender camaraderie, and raise the costs of defection.²⁵

Why terrorism continues to charm people around the world, according to the qualified experts referenced above, is not because those people suffer from political frustration, economic disadvantage, or religious indoctrination. They are not, by and large, angry, impoverished, or especially pious. They are instead looking to fill their lives with companionship and significance. They join terrorist groups because they see affiliation with a global phenomenon as the best way to experience intimacy and solidarity with like-minded people – satisfying a *social* need more basic than anything that politicians, economists, or religious scholars could ever offer.²⁶

This essay suggests that as long as America's CVE strategy relies on political, economic, and religious solutions to jihadist terrorism, and thus ignores the fundamental human need to *belong to something important*, terrorist groups will continue to be a refuge for many people. What follows in the next section is a summary of the author's anecdotal conclusions about the underlying causes and conditions for terrorism. Thereafter, the results of research conducted by this author with subject matter experts in the field of countering violent extremism are presented and discussed. The essay concludes with the recommendation that academic researchers should more rigorously explore the sociological underpinnings of terrorism while simultaneously vetting the effectiveness of socially-derived CVE policies and programs currently in place.

Experience From The Field

My research in countering violent extremism began informally, with an academic curiosity that started in the interrogation booth in Iraq. I debriefed hundreds of accused terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, now ISIS or ISIL) between 2007 and 2008. Some were justly charged, some only with familial connections to the real suspects, but all of the detainees I interrogated reshaped my assumptions about why people joined or supported groups that proudly identified as terrorist organizations. I had trained for the interrogation job shortly after 9/11, with a near-doctrinal expectation that the people in orange jump suits would be poor, uneducated, conservative, and intensely religious. They would be political outsiders, economic pariahs, and religious zealots. Terrorism, I suspected, would be their outlet for frustration and rage, as well as the fulfilment a profound spiritual mandate.

As an interrogator with some success, I wish I had aggregated my data at the time. Those hundreds of anecdotes, detailing how and why particular individuals joined and stayed with the ISI could be useful in my now post hoc effort to understand the true nature of terrorism's prodigious appeal to people across generations. A lack of empirical data notwithstanding, I recall unequivocally that very few actually fit the stereotype described above.

Most of my detainees were fairly well educated, completely uninterested in state politics, gainfully employed in one way or another, and – perhaps most surprising – they were religiously apathetic. Even those detainees who were “assessed” (a trademark analytical term) to be a local “sharia enforcer [moral policeman],” for example, almost always dispensed with the religious veneer when we were alone in the booth. They dropped the formal Arabic, chain-smoked cigarettes, and waxed nostalgic about Saddam. They cursed, talked about extramarital affairs, and admitted they would much rather visit Beirut

someday than go on Hajj. They seemed much prouder of the imagined success of their group than of the glory such success brought to God.

By way of employment, so many detained ISI members whom I interviewed were independent merchants – car salesmen in particular – that it almost became a comedy in the interrogation booth. “Let me guess,” I would sometimes ask pre-emptively, “you buy and sell cars for a living?” It was the kind of job that allowed a man to work his own schedule, maintain independence, avoid daily interaction with colleagues, and earn a pretty good living doing it.

On state politics, most had no opinion whatsoever. Raised under a dictator most of their lives, and, after 2003, in system “of Shi’a political monopoly” (a term I often heard), most ISI members simply saw politics as inaccessible and meaningless. By and large, however, this fact made them more apathetic than angry.

On religion, most said they were proud but not devout Muslims. They admitted that they tried to pray five times a day but usually missed the dawn prayer and intended to make up for it later. They regularly went to the mosque on Fridays, but more so as an obligation stemming from community pressure. They described it as an act of routine rather than an act of worship, and confessed they feared the social costs of being absent from Friday prayer more so than the spiritual costs.

No detained terrorist I encountered ever attempted to lecture me on Islam or cite religious belief as the reason why he joined the ISI. Many complained about their poor economic status in society, as well as about the lacklustre Sunni leadership in the new Iraqi government, but none cited these as “last straw” reasons for their involvement in the ISI. When it came down to actually joining the group, nearly every detainee I spoke with recounted a social phenomenon – “all the Shabab (young people) had joined... Everybody I knew had sworn allegiance...”

I will never forget one detainee – exceptionally familiar with American culture –

who called the ISI “his Fight Club,” in reference to the 1999 movie starring Brad Pitt. As a freelance car salesman, he did not have anywhere particular to be during the day, and he apparently liked the idea of moonlighting with like-minded young people to do something regimented and, in their minds, meaningful. I recall nearly every military-age male detainee from Fallujah and Ramadi telling me that they wanted to fight for their country at first, but the Iraqi Army – by then seen as an exclusive Shi’a organization – was not an option for Sunni boys from Anbar.

Even the leadership ranks told a similar tale – “I met an influential man in prison... We used to work together under Saddam... We rekindled a strong relationship... We decided to work together after getting released.”²⁷ Across the ranks, joining the ISI was a product of socializing with others who were themselves somehow already involved.

In the interrogation booth, most detainees followed a fairly predictable emotional trajectory. The first concern was their family. “Were they okay?” “Who else was arrested?” – these were usually their first questions, understandable in light of the fact that I usually spoke with detainees shortly after their capture (itself a tumultuous experience). But when visceral emotions waned and detainees began to realize the permanence of their situation, cooperative detainees attempted to probe for information about their brothers-in-arms. They wanted to know who else has been detained, who has been released, who is in whose custody, in which prison, and how quickly they too could join general population and interact with their comrades.²⁸

With varying degrees of cunning, my detainees attempted to find out which of their comrades had “talked” and which had not. One reason, admittedly, was to narrow down who might be to blame for their own detention, but more commonly, I sensed that they wanted to test my commitment to discretion – “If I cooperate and reveal the boss’s location, will he know it was me who gave him up?” The final hurdle in gaining cooperation, in other words, was disabusing a detainee of the idea that *his comrades* (not God) would think ill of

him for cooperating. Once my detainees came to believe their own social standing in the organization would not suffer for their cooperation, their most pressing inhibition usually disappeared. Significantly, cooperative detainees seemed relatively unconcerned with the political, economic, or spiritual repercussions that might result from “helping” the enemy.

Overall, it struck me that very few ISI members in Iraq had joined the group because they resented the Shia-led government, or because they needed a well-paying job, or because they believed killing infidels was a religious mandate. They did it, at least in their minds, because they saw anti-Western terrorism as their *zeitgeist* – an epic social phenomenon that they felt defined their time and place in the world, and which produced such an intense and regenerative gravitational pull that it became an inescapable fashion for clusters of people across the country.²⁹ Not to suggest that the terrorists I encountered were good guys after all – they probably would have embraced violence and insurgency in society without the likes of al-Qaeda – but what I found is that that they were bad guys for none of the reasons I expected.

Cross-Examining The Anecdotes

For almost ten years, I have questioned whether my observations of terrorism’s driving causes had a broader application. I have wondered if the rationales I observed in the interrogation booth in Iraq might apply to terrorist recruits becoming “radicalized” in places further afield. Unquestionably, the circumstances in Iraq in 2007 were unique enough to produce a specific type of violent extremist, and yet I have become convinced that the motives for joining an avowed terrorist group can be consistent enough across time and space to produce some informative conclusions.

To test my theory, I conducted research with some of the world’s leading CVE authorities.³⁰ I surveyed a panel of people recognized as subject matter experts in

interviewing, investigating, and interrogating terrorism suspects, most of whom have had direct interaction with terrorists during their careers. The objective in conducting the survey was to cross-examine my anecdotal evidence for the primacy of terrorism's social causes by comparing it with the opinions of other professionals who have interfaced with terrorism suspects in various settings.

The experts herein referenced have decades of combined experience interviewing and interrogating terrorism suspects in a range of contexts. From Ireland to Yemen, from Iraq to the United States, these experts have developed first-hand opinions about what drove their subjects to embrace terrorism, and, conversely, what would have kept them away from it in the first place. The diversity of experience was an experimental risk, insofar as inconsistent opinions were highly likely in such a setting. But I was pleasantly surprised to instead discover major consistencies, allowing generalizable conclusions to be drawn.

First, I asked each participant to fill out a simple ranking survey (below). By way of context, I asked each participant to imagine a situation in which a prototypical "ISIL-curious" individual, living outside the scope of the immediate battlefield (Iraq/Syria), was considering swearing an oath of allegiance to the group. Visualizing a moment of self-reflection, I asked each participant to brainstorm a set of conditions that would *prevent* him or her from joining or rendering services to the terrorist group – influences that I herein refer to as "deterrent factors," in contrast with "push and pull" factors that CVE scholars use to describe terrorist motivators.³¹

Specifically, I asked my subjects to prioritize the nine factors listed below, by order of their potential for general deterrence, and that by bearing in mind the following questions: What factors would be most influential in dissuading a prospective ISIL-recruit from committing to join or otherwise render support to the group? What value(s) and/or realization(s) must that person possess, obtain, and/or maintain as requisites to sincerely reject the group's message?³²

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|----|-----|--|
| #1 | ___ | Respect for/Representation in one's government (Political) |
| #2 | ___ | Respect for the reputation of one's family/community (Political, Social) |
| #3 | ___ | Distance from/Severing ties with those involved (Social) |
| #4 | ___ | Responsibilities to one's immediate family (Economic, Social, Religious) |
| #5 | ___ | Financial dependence on one's government (Economic) |
| #6 | ___ | Newfound employment/Job opportunities (Economic, Social) |
| #7 | ___ | Religious belief that terrorism is a moral wrong (Religious) |
| #8 | ___ | Fear of death or imprisonment (Emotional) |
| #9 | ___ | Resentment of terrorists/Disgust at their tactics (Emotional) |

For purposes of categorization, I assigned one or more of the following classifications to each factor: political, economic, social, religious, or emotional. There is a degree of categorical overlap with some of the factors: "Responsibilities to immediate family," as one example, could be an economic, social, or religious factor, depending on the respondent's reading of the situation. That in mind, I asked each participant to elaborate orally on his interpretation of the ambiguous factors, and thus clarify which aspect of the factor (e.g. economic, political, social) drove him to prioritize it as such.

I asked survey participants to rank the above factors from 1 to 9 in descending order of their deterrent strength. A rank of "1," for instance, represents the strongest possible deterrent effect, while "9" indicates the weakest deterrent effect. A lower "average rank" indicates that factor's greater deterrent strength.

Results and Analysis

In descending order, the following is a re-working of the original list with the average ranks of survey participants beside each factor:

- #4 Responsibilities to one's immediate family (Economic, Social, Religious) Average rank: 3.4
- #3 Distance from/Severing ties with those involved (Social) Average rank: 3.9
- #2 Respect for the reputation of one's family/community (Political, Social) Average rank: 4.2
- #6 Newfound employment/Job opportunities (Economic, Social) Average rank: 5.3
- #5 Financial dependence on one's government (Economic) Average rank: 5.5
- #9 Resentment of terrorists/Disgust at their tactics (Emotional) Average rank: 5.6
- #1 Respect for/Representation in one's political system (Political) Average rank: 6.5
- #8 Fear of death or imprisonment (Emotional) Average rank: 6.6
- #7 Religious belief that terrorism is a moral wrong (Religious) Average rank: 7.4

As the results indicate, the deterrent factors that cluster towards the top of the list are disproportionately *social factors*. Following social factors are economic factors. Thereafter, political and emotional factors seem to be at near parity. Finally, and significantly, the trademark religious factor is dead last.

To disentangle the first deterrent factor ranked above, I asked survey participants to clarify which *type* of family responsibilities would most effectively keep someone away from terrorism. Were they economic responsibilities (“My family needs my paycheck”)? Were they religious (“God commands me to be there for my family”)? Were they social (“I have an important family role to play”)? As it turns out, each participant’s narrative explanation showed a strong inclination toward the latter: Social responsibilities to the family, they claimed, would be most salient in deterring a candidate from joining a terrorist group. According to the experts, responsibilities to acculturate family members to social mores – by establishing and maintaining traditional family role-play – are stronger anchors than familial duties to be a breadwinner or moral guide. On average, in fact, survey participants considered these social responsibilities to the family as the single most influential deterrent factor.

The second factor ranked above is expressly social in nature. On average, survey participants ranked “Distance from/severing ties with those involved [in terrorism]” as the second most influential deterrent, explaining that recruitment pipelines almost always

utilize the infrastructure of existing social relationships. Peter Neumann, Director of the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) summarized the process as follows: “The vast majority go [to fight] as part of clusters... A couple of them might go first, they stay in touch with each other, and one by one they pull their friends out there.”³³ Although recruitment is taking place in the fluid realm of cyber space, in other words, recruiters target very specific (and familiar) places on the ground, reaching out to people they already know from back home. The process is a two-way social transaction between familiar people, not a one-way religious or political brainwashing between strangers. Thus, disrupting the aforementioned social transaction is crucial in stemming the flow of new recruits.

The factor ranked third – “Respect for the reputation of family/community” – is a social deterrent more so than a political deterrent, as explained by survey participants. In their view, the deterrent effect in having respect for family or community comes from a cultural obligation to reflect well on one’s place of origin. In societies where terrorism is exceptionally prevalent, family reputation is also a strong form of social currency. Safeguarding family status in those societies is a holistic, multi-generational effort involving all those who carry the family name. As a result, there is a strong acculturation not to dishonor the family’s reputation – to “steal from the family’s ‘social savings account,’” as one participant described it – even when there exists a strong personal opposition to the family’s position on certain matters.³⁴ Those who join terrorist groups in spite of the reputational risk to their families and communities likely see their identity-based social group as weak vis-à-vis some other entity. In that case, the obligation to preserve the family’s or community’s good name – by pursuing a traditional, non-violent vocation, for example – loses its dissuasive power. Terrorism is far less socially risky in such a situation.

Regarding the factor ranked fourth – “Newfound employment/Job opportunities” – some disentangling is also necessary. This factor represents the crux of the traditional

economic interpretation, and it would probably be ranked first if I had surveyed economists.³⁵ However, the CVE experts who participated in my survey interpreted this factor differently. The value in getting a job, they suggested, is not the economic advantage it represents per se, but rather the opportunity it provides for developing social networks unaffiliated with terrorism. While not altogether insignificant, pay checks are a secondary benefit of gaining employment, according to CVE experts. “It would be more important,” one participant said, “for a guy to get a mechanic job, not because he would earn a good wage, or even because he would be distracted with work, but because he would be socializing every day with other mechanics.” What pushes people to embrace terrorism, according to this interpretation, is other human beings, not money or the lack thereof. And thus, opportunities to socialize represent the main deterrent utility even within the traditional economic interpretation of terrorism’s root causes.

Towards the bottom of the list are the factors that are exclusively economic, emotional, political, and religious. For their part, the economic factors occupy a position right in the middle – they are more salient than political and religious factors, but not as pressing as social factors. There are two points worth noting here: First, that the most common solution to terrorism – democratic participation – ranks near the bottom of the list; and second, that challenging the terrorist message on dogmatic (religious) grounds is even less useful. According to CVE experts, neither political representation nor religious moderation are rudiments in curbing terrorism’s appeal.

Towards a Sociological Interpretation

The empirical results of the survey were not altogether surprising to this author, however the narratives I heard during follow-on interviews revealed an interesting nuance in the social factor. My survey participants described the process of becoming involved with

terrorism as a socially centred phenomenon that starts positive – with joyous camaraderie, feelings of belonging, and the rallying around a common cause. But just as frequently, the process turns negative, when “the proverbial honeymoon comes to an end,” to quote one expert. Over time, there emerges a toxic peer-pressure to *never defect*, a development that often manifests in threats of violence and/or a sinister reminder that one’s very identity hinges on his or her ongoing commitment to the group.

The actual point of transition from positive to negative social influences remains a mystery. I found no consensus within my panel of CVE experts as to when the process is likely to take place. One expert believes it occurs quite early, as recruits quickly realize “this is not what [they] signed up for.” Another expert pointed out that because all my survey participants (much like myself) have interacted with terrorists only after their detention, we are privy only to a post-hoc explanation of motive. For reasons of self-preservation, detained terrorists tend to minimize their personal complicity in the decision to join the group, instead emphasizing the intimidation they felt from others. Anecdotally I know this to be true. The positive social need originally satisfied by joining the group, then, might only transition to the negative in retrospect, or may be altogether insincere as it is with those who seek to minimize their role for legal reasons. It is difficult, therefore, to ever know exactly when (if ever) the negative social pressure to stay with the group actually overtakes the positive reasons for joining.

Putting the nuance aside, there is one generalizable conclusion to be taken away from this essay. By and large, we can conclude, terrorist groups are popular because they provide people with a strong identity, a role to play, a proud affiliation, and an opportunity to share intimate experiences with others. A global terrorist profile is still a red herring, but by understanding terrorism’s appeal in sociological terms, we can better predict the conditions that would make someone vulnerable to recruitment by a terrorist group.³⁶

Taking all this into account, a vulnerable terror recruit is someone with no important social role to play in his/her family, someone who has ongoing contact with a current member of the terrorist group (usually by social media), someone with little regard for his or her family and/or community's standing in greater society, and someone with no employment of the kind that would provide him or her an alternate social sphere. Typically, he or she will join the group in order to satisfy needs for social interaction, intimacy, and a sense of belonging and identity. At some point in his or her experience, however, reasons for staying with the group may transition from the positive (those just mentioned) to the negative (peer-pressure to stay). Regardless, he or she will emphasize the primacy of those negative social pressures when explaining his or her involvement to investigators after the fact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If it is the mission statement of CVE to “address behaviours that could potentially lead to terrorism,”³⁷ I believe the quasi-profile outlined above offers a better understanding of those behaviours, and thus a better chance at countering them. Inevitably, politicians, journalists, and academics will critique this essay on the grounds that there can be no such thing as a terrorist profile, and that the actual reasons for terrorism's appeal are hazy, dynamic, and vary greatly over time and space. Yet, while it is certainly true that what drives any particular *individual* to join or remain in a terrorist organization will be context-dependent, and that overreliance on these kind of profiles can lead to adverse consequences – from discrimination and false positives to overlooking real threats that simply do not fit the model – these can be at least partially mitigated by focusing in on a particular group (such as al-Qaeda or ISIL) or a specific pool of potential recruits (such as foreign fighters).

Ultimately, however, this author would gladly accept charges of oversimplification,

provided that doing so inspires policy-makers to seek alternatives to religious, economic, and political solutions to terrorism. Up to now, the disproportionate emphasis since 9/11 on democracy, capitalism, and secularism as solutions for terrorism in the Middle East have been largely a product of the reality that everyone wants to find salience in their discipline: Economists want terrorism to be about unemployment, political scientists want it to be about dictatorship, and orientalists want it to be about Islam.³⁸ For my part, I have found that the roots of terrorism's appeal are primarily sociological – a fact that is all the more significant because neither I nor any of the experts I surveyed for this essay are sociologists.

Research aimed at testing the primacy of social motivations for jihadist terrorism will likely corroborate this essay's thesis. To that end, what is needed now is more research on social-based motivators for jihadist terrorism – research that applies rigorous methodology and produces much more nuanced empirical data than that presented in this essay.

One such research project is being done by Quantum Communications, based in Lebanon. Their March 2015 white paper on terrorist motivators provides a much-needed disaggregation of terrorism motivations – by categorizing terrorists as “identity seekers” or “revenge seekers” or “ideologues,” for example – all based on an analysis of their word choice during interviews.³⁹ The report was recently featured in an *Atlantic* article,⁴⁰ and it was cited by U.S. assistant secretary of defence for special operations, Michael Lumpkin, as something that could help the U.S. Defence Department with counter-messaging and targeting.⁴¹

As an investigative novelty, the Quantum report is an excellent launching point for further research. One compelling possibility is to examine terrorist motivations with geospatial analysis. The Quantum report makes a preliminary suggestion that motivations seem to fluctuate by proximity to the “jihad battlefield,” with more “identity seekers” joining from Western countries, and more “money seekers” and “status seekers” coming

from places less far afield. Looking at motivations through a geospatial lens would help provide the nuance lacking in generalized reports about terrorism's root causes, as well as provide a wholly different dimension to research done by the likes of John Horgan, who has examined the evolution of motivations within a single individual terrorist over time.⁴²

In addition to blazing new trails in research, there is a dire need for more rigorous evaluation of socially-centred CVE policies that are currently in place. Hotlines in Europe, Canada, and Australia,⁴³ as well as rehabilitation programs in Europe and the Middle East,⁴⁴ are just two examples of ongoing initiatives that approach terrorism as a social phenomenon and attempt to counter it on those terms.

Enabling family members of potential terrorist recruits to seek help from qualified intervention specialists via a hotline allows a family keep its affairs "in house," and eliminates the need to choose between "betrayal" and outright inaction. Rather than putting further distance between an at-risk person and their most intimate social sphere, hotlines let responsible family members re-assert their authority, restore a beleaguered social bond, and mitigate long-term legal problems in the process. Some extremist rehabilitation programs, as another example, focus on the quieting effects of social intimacy and responsibility, and they aim to leverage social relationships for specific deterrence, as well for added surveillance.⁴⁵

Admittedly, both initiatives mentioned above still require a longitudinal evaluation of effectiveness in order to prove their viability, and that is no small task.⁴⁶ It is this author's strong belief, however, that such evaluations of these programs will confirm their effectiveness in the end.

The success of terrorists in recruiting is no accident. Recruiters seem to know exactly what potential members are missing in their lives, and they likewise know how to provide it. Recruiters assert themselves as purveyors of friendship and community, and they target

lonely and isolated individuals who seem to lack both.⁴⁷ Poverty and piety have never been essential characteristics. It is therefore time to move on from the assumption that opening markets, providing jobs, and preaching the virtues of secularism will ever successfully counter violent extremism.

There is certainly hope that despite the robust popularity of jihadist terrorism these days,⁴⁸ understanding why people flock to join terrorist groups will allow policymakers to undermine their appeal in a significant and lasting manner. When CVE policies eventually start to respect the social causes of terrorism, young people who were once vulnerable to the charms of terrorist recruiters will find profound social satisfaction in other areas. Eventually, the likes of ISIL will go out of style as they succumb to the weight of their own brutality and hypocrisy. Policymakers, journalists, and academics, however, can surely expedite that process by giving susceptible people a different direction and a much safer place to land.

Notes

¹ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "[Countering Violent Extremism in America](#)," June 2015, The George Washington University's "Program on Extremism." See also Steven Heydemann, "[Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice](#)," *USIP Insights*, Issue 1, Spring 2014. Information about GWU's Program on Extremism is accessible through the program's [website](#).

² Some have disparaged [CVE as pseudoscience](#); Some believe it indiscriminately [prejudices against Muslim populations](#); Others see it as simply [underfunded and under-researched](#).

³ Regarding "scholarly meditations on terrorism's root causes" and "conferences designed to bridge academia and policy," see endnote 4 for a few examples. For an example of "diplomatic pressure on Arab governments," see H.R.3643 - [Saudi Arabia Accountability Act of 2003](#), 108th Congress (2003-2004). Since 2003, the Saudi Arabia Accountability Act has been subject to revisions three times, most recently in 2009. To paraphrase, the act requires that the Saudi government implement holistic, comprehensive policies to prevent the spread of terrorism inside the Kingdom, and, by extension, to points abroad.

⁴ Evidence of this paradigm shift towards a better appreciation of CVE research can be seen in such events as the White House's "[Summit on Countering Violent Extremism](#)," the emergence of CVE units within the [Department of Homeland Security](#), and Department of Defense-sponsored research programs such as the [Minerva Initiative](#). Furthermore, verbiage within the [2016 National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#), signed by President Obama in November 2015, entrusts "[t]he Secretary of Defense [with] develop[ing] creative and agile concepts, technologies, and strategies across all available media to most effectively reach target audiences, to counter and degrade the ability of adversaries and potential adversaries to persuade, inspire, and recruit..." Sec. 1056 (a)(3).

⁵ In 2011, the Associated Press reported that in the ten years since 9/11, there had been 120,000 terrorism-related arrests and 35,000 terrorism convictions worldwide, as compared to "just a few hundred" annually in the years before. Marth Mendoza, "[Rightly or Wrongly, thousands convicted of terrorism post-9/11](#)," *The Associated Press*, republished by *NBC News*, September 4, 2011.

The surge in terrorism-related arrests since 2001 is not meant by this author to indicate sweeping successes in the War on Terror, nor to imply that all those arrested were actual terrorists, but rather to merely demonstrate the increased opportunity for law enforcement to develop a more aggregate picture of terrorist motivations in the post-9/11 world as compared with years prior. The American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for their part, allowed human intelligence collectors in the U.S. military (including this author) to debrief accused terrorists in numbers unprecedented in American history. Finally, the scholars cited in this essay performed the majority of their research on terrorism in the post-9/11 environment. It would be useful for the reader here to draw his or her attention to endnote 20 and notice the dates of publication.

⁶ Much has been made of U.S.-led regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they should suffice as examples of the “political solution” in action. On the phrase “opening markets,” the Bush and Obama administrations have overtly stated their intent to open markets and bring job opportunities to the Middle East, as measures designed to reduce the appeal of terrorism. See endnotes 9, 14 and 16. For clarification on the phrase “pressuring religiously-conservative allies like Saudi Arabia to expand religious freedom,” see George W. Bush’s [“Freedom Agenda,”](#) which itemizes the Bush administration’s plans to “encourage interfaith dialogue” in Saudi Arabia.

It bears mentioning here that the United Kingdom also passed laws in 2015 to crackdown on radical Islamist messaging on social media. Simon Benson, [“It’s time to silence the hate preachers: New legislation will outlaw radical Islamic groups,”](#) *The Daily Telegraph*, February 12, 2015.

⁷ The White House. [“State of the Union Address,”](#) January 31, 2006.

⁸ The White House. [“President Bush Speaks at Air Force Academy Graduation,”](#) June 2, 2004.

⁹ The White House. [“The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,”](#) September 2002.

¹⁰ George W. Bush. [“Remarks to The International Conference on Financing for Development, United Nations,”](#) March 22, 2002.

¹¹ The White House. [“National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,”](#) September 2006.

¹² Michael Goodwin. [“Say it Obama: ‘Islamic,’”](#) *New York Post*, February 18, 2015.

¹³ The White House. [“Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,”](#) May 23, 2013.

¹⁴ The White House. [“The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,”](#) February 2015.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State. [“Secretary Kerry’s Townhall Meeting With Embassy Ottawa Staff,”](#) October 28, 2014.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State. [“Remarks at the Council of the Americas’ 44th Conference on the Americas,”](#) May 7, 2014. See also the [remarks](#) by U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf, which included the matter-of-fact claim that the U.S.-led coalition “[cannot] win the war on ISIS by killing them. We need to find them jobs.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ On poverty and unemployment, see Omer Taspinar, [“You Can’t Understand Why People Join ISIS Without Understanding Relative Deprivation,”](#) *The Huffington Post*, May 25, 2015; and Charlotte Alfred and Rowaida Abdelaziz, [“Syrians And Iraqis In ISIS-Held Territory Face An Impossible Choice,”](#) *The Huffington Post*, November 5, 2015.

On political resentment, see The Week, [“France’s Alienated Muslims,”](#) January 24, 2015; Walden Bello and Foreign Policy in Focus, [“How the Left Failed France’s Muslims,”](#) *The Nation*, February

6, 2015; Carla Power, "[Why There's Tension Between France and Its Muslim Population](#)," *Time*, January 8, 2015; Alan Krueger, "[What Makes a Terrorist](#)," American Enterprise Institute, November 7, 2007, and a book of the same title, Krueger, Alan B., 2007. *What makes a terrorist?: Economics and the roots of terrorism*, Princeton University Press. Krueger's book refutes the economic explanation for terrorism's appeal but suggests a political explanation in its stead.

On Islam and Wahhabi propagandizing, see Carol E. B. Choksy and Jamsheed Choksy, "[The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad](#)," *World Affairs Journal*, May/June 2015; Associated Free Press, "[Saudi must stop financing fundamentalist mosques abroad: Merkel's deputy](#)," *The Express Tribune*, December 6, 2015; Alastair Crooke, "[You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia](#)," *The Huffington Post*, October 27, 2014; Karen Armstrong, "[Wahhabism to ISIS: How Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism](#)," *New Statesman*, November 27, 2014; Stern, Jessica, 2003. *Terror in the name of god: Why religious militants kill*. 1st ed. New York: Ecco.; Peter Bergen, "['Jihadi John': The bourgeois terrorist](#)," CNN, February 27, 2015. Bergen's article refutes the economic explanation for terrorism's appeal but suggests religious ideology in its stead; Erick Stakelbeck, "[Jobs for Jihadists? Mr. Obama, poverty doesn't create terrorism, ideology does](#)," Fox News, March 9, 2015; and Graeme Wood, "[What ISIS Really Wants](#)," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

¹⁹ For reasons of classification and/or redaction, many intelligence professionals are either prohibited from or otherwise disinclined to record their experiences in a way that would chronicle the motivations of their former subjects. Even without the classification barrier, memoirs from former interrogators seem less concerned with the reasons why a given detainee joined their terrorist group, and instead focused on which techniques eventually "broke" the detainee (incited cooperation), or simply on how the intelligence picture was enhanced thereby. See Soufan, Ali H., and Daniel Freedman. 2011. *The Black Banners: The inside story of 9/11 and the war against al-Qaeda*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.; Alexander, Matt and Bruning, J.R. 2008, *How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. interrogators who used brains, not brutality, to take down the deadliest man in Iraq*, 1st Free Press, Free Press, New York; Carle, Glenn. 2011. *The Interrogator: An education*, Nation Books, New York; and Fair, Eric. 2015. *Consequence: A memoir*, Henry Holt and Co. New York.

²⁰ Major scholarly work on the primacy of social causes for jihadist terrorism include Atran, Scott, 2010, *Talking to the enemy: faith, brotherhood, and the (un)making of terrorists*, 1st Edition, Ecco Press, New York; Horgan, J., 1974 & Ebooks Corporation 2014, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 2nd Edition, Taylor and Francis, Hoboken; Horgan, J., 2009, *Walking away from terrorism: accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*, Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY; Bjørgo, T. & Horgan, J., 2009, *Leaving terrorism behind: individual and collective disengagement*, Routledge, New York; London; Sageman, Marc & Ebrary, I. 2004, *Understanding terror networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia; Sageman, Marc, 2008, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia;

and Vertigans, Stephen. 2011, *The sociology of terrorism: peoples, places and processes*, Routledge, London.

For other academic and editorial work that presents a similar conclusion to that in the above literature, see Patrick Tucker, "[Why Join ISIS? How Fighters Respond When You Ask Them](#)," *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2015; Lydia Wilson, "[What I Discovered From Interviewing Imprisoned ISIS Fighters](#)," *The Nation*, October 21, 2015; Kenan Malik "[Europe's Dangerous Multiculturalism](#)," December 8, 2015; Martin David Jones and M.L.R. Smith, "[Curbing The Enthusiasm: Why De-Radicalization Programs Get Fanaticism Wrong](#)," December 8, 2015; and Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan and William P. Evans, "[The Critical Role of Friends in Networks For Countering Violent Extremism: Toward a Theory of Vicarious Help-Seeking](#)," December 8, 2015. This list of scholarly works is by no means exhaustive, but it represents much of the extant literature and editorial work that touches on the social causes and cures for jihadist terrorism.

²¹ See Horgan, J., 2009, *Walking away from terrorism: accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*, Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY; and Bjørgo, T. & Horgan, J., 2009, *Leaving terrorism behind: individual and collective disengagement*, Routledge, New York; London.

²² Atran, Scott, 2010, *Talking to the enemy: faith, brotherhood, and the (un)making of terrorists*, 1st Edition, Ecco Press, New York.

²³ Sageman, Marc & Ebrary, I. 2004, *Understanding terror networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia; Sageman, Marc, 2008, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

²⁴ According to Peter Bergen, "[Marc] Sageman examined the backgrounds of 172 militants who were part of al Qaeda or a similar group. Just under half were professionals; two-thirds were either middle or upper class and had gone to college; indeed, several had doctorates." Bergen used Sageman's empirical data to refute the notion that terrorism mainly appeals to uneducated, poor people. Bergen suggests that jihadist terrorism is a project of the Muslim bourgeoisie – a thesis that certainly squares with his own experiences interviewing and following Osama Bin Laden, whom he clearly considers an exemplar.

²⁵ Vertigans, Stephen. 2011, *The sociology of terrorism: peoples, places and processes*, Routledge, London.

²⁶ See endnote 20 for a list of literature that makes the same proposal regarding root causes of terrorism as this author.

²⁷ The reference to "meeting an influential man in prison," for its part, is a significant point that has rightly garnered some editorial attention since the rise to prominence of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the revelation that he was previously in U.S. custody. Anecdotally, I can confirm that many ISI leaders had become acquainted with each other in US prisons in Iraq. For more analysis see Terrence McCoy, "[How the Islamic State evolved in an American prison](#)," *The Washington Post*,

November 4, 2014; and Brad Parks, "[How a US prison camp helped create ISIS](#)," *New York Post*, May 30, 2015.

²⁸ The claim about wanting to join general population warrants clarification. In the particular prison in which I worked, detainees were separated from each other for security reasons, and there was no "general population," per se. I observed many operational benefits for the segregation policy, which include physical safety for certain detainees as well as preventing collusion between familiar detainees. Separation is an approved approach technique as defined by the [U.S. Army's Field Manual for interrogation](#).

²⁹ It is appropriate here to cite Will McCants' *ISIS Apocalypse*, in which McCants similarly describes ISIS' jihadist ideology as a fashion enveloping an entire generation. See McCants, W.F., 2015, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The history, strategy, and doomsday vision of the Islamic State*, First Edition, St. Martin's Press, New York.

³⁰ Here I am indebted to the expertise of Charles Berger, Richard Barrett, Robert McFadden, Steven Kleinman, Mark Fallon, Martin Reardon, John Horgan, Michael Williams, and Mary Beth Altier. These individuals are subject matter experts in [countering] violent extremism, most with extensive field experience interviewing accused terror suspects. Their academic backgrounds include Middle Eastern studies, security studies, and, most commonly, psychology. Detailed credentials are available on request.

³¹ For information on "push" and "pull" factors as terms related to CVE research, see Steven Heydemann, "[Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice](#)," *USIP Insights*, Issue 1, Spring 2014, pages 3-8. As a flip side to push and pull factors, my goal has been to delimit which category of factors would most effectively act as a *deterrents*. To that end, I face the similar challenges as those confronting CVE researchers seeking to identify nuanced motives.

³² For the purposes of the exercise, I asked each expert to suspend their disbelief in the existence of a "prototypical" ISIL-supporter (some were more willing than others to do so). I asked my survey participants to envision someone living outside the area of the current conflict (Iraq and the Levant), and who bears demographic and personality traits similar to what they believed were most prevalent among ISIL's foreign fighters.

Since ISIL is a group with no overt support from any Western government, I make the assumption that factor #1 above – "Respect for/Representation in one's government" – would be a dissuasive factor, and my survey participants understood the assumption in advance of completing the survey. Similarly, I make the assumption that an individual's immediate social network (family, community) would be generally opposed to ISIL, and hence that factors #2 and #4 – "Respect for the reputation of family/community" and "Responsibilities to one's immediate family" – would also be dissuasive factors. Several participants rightly pointed out that without such caveats, entities like community or family *that support terrorism* can be very powerful in motivating their constituents to actually join a terrorist group.

³³ Peter Neumann, quoted in [“Why Westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight,”](#) *New Scientist*, September 10, 2014.

³⁴ “Steal from the family’s social savings account” is an interesting metaphor. The participant in question suggested a geospatial correlation (not necessarily causation) between terrorist violence and “traditional” societies in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, where family/tribal authority tends to supercede that of the central government (provided a central government even exists). According to the [“Global Terrorism Index Report,”](#) published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, “82% of all deaths from terrorist attacks occur in just 5 countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria” – countries with prevalent tribal justice systems and weak central governments.

³⁵ For a few examples of scholarship supporting the economic thesis, see [“Exploding misconceptions,”](#) Economics Focus, *The Economist*, December 16, 2010; and Goldstein, Kevin B. 2005. [“Unemployment, Inequality and Terrorism: Another Look at the Relationship between Economics and Terrorism,”](#) Undergraduate Economic Review: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

³⁶ In this connection, President Obama is quoted as saying, “We all know there is no one profile of a violent extremist or terrorist, so there is no way to predict who will become radicalized.” [“Remarks by the President in Closing of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,”](#) Washington DC, February 18, 2015. It is this author’s opinion that Obama’s claim is too categorical a rejection. Admittedly, there is no single terrorist profile, however it is certainly also possible to identify the circumstances that would facilitate identifying potential violent extremists.

³⁷ A reference to endnote 1.

³⁸ Youssef Cherif. [“The 3000: Why are thousands of Tunisians flocking to Daesh?”](#) The London School of Economics and Political Science, Middle East Centre Blog, September 9, 2015. Cherif makes the point that Tunisia, a country with over 3,000 of its youth in ISIL’s ranks today, should be a good case for the economic argument: It is a country with high unemployment as well as a high number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. However, Cherif argues that Tunisia’s failed nationalist campaign has left Tunisians without a national identity, and hence vulnerable to groups that offer just that – identity. What propels Tunisians to ISIL, Cherif writes, “is hatred towards the home country, a feeling of not-belonging and an eagerness to endorse a new identity.”

³⁹ Quantum Communications, [“Understanding Jihadists in Their Own Words,”](#) Issue 2: “The White Papers,” March 2015.

⁴⁰ Patrick Tucker, [“Why Join ISIS? How Fighters Respond When You Ask Them,”](#) *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2015.

⁴¹ Patrick Tucker, [“Pentagon: State Doesn’t Have Enough People Tweeting At ISIS,”](#) *Defense One*, October 22, 2015.

⁴² This is a reference to Horgan’s work on disengagement, cited in endnote 21. The value in this kind of work cannot be overstated, however, geospatial analysis takes on an equal but opposite task: To examine a latitudinal snapshot of terrorist motivations across space, as opposed to Horgan’s goal of examining a longitudinal “reel-to-reel” of terrorist motivation in a single location (within the

individual). Geospatial analysis might prove to be worthwhile complement to Horgan et. al's work on the psychology of disengagement.

⁴³ "Family terror hotlines" are growing in popularity, with hotlines currently in use in [France](#), [Austria](#), [Germany](#), [Canada](#), and plans to establish a hotline in [Australia](#). They allow family members a low-stakes intervention opportunity. This list is not exhaustive.

⁴⁴ These rehabilitation programs adopt many different nomenclatures and rubriks. Some refer to themselves as "de-radicalization" programs, others as "re-integration" or "exit" programs, for example. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the rehabilitation program is referred to as a center for "advice and sponsorship" (للمناصرة والرعاية). Although always respondent to local conditions, their basic objective is the same: They aim to provide an alternative to long-term incarceration by acting as a halfway house for individuals accused to terrorism offenses, bridging the gap between the "battlefield" writ large and free society. Very promising rehabilitation programs already exist in [Aarhus, Denmark](#) and [Germany](#). French authorities also announced they are piloting a rehabilitation program in the Alsace region, and the French newspaper *Le Parisien* [reported](#) that the program will incorporate a phase called "restoring the social bond." These European programs tout the primacy of social causes and cures for violent extremism, and, if funded and staffed properly, will likely be very successful.

The Saudi Arabian [rehabilitation program](#) is beginning to look at the fundamentals of terrorism with an appreciation for its social causes, and hence is willing to engage and support an accused terrorists family, and even help find wives and apartments for parolees. It is significant, in this author's opinion, that the Saudis are finally viewing terrorism as a product of social dissatisfaction (rather than political discontent), even if some western journalists and scholars have rightly identified these techniques as coercive, if not also tantamount to bribery: See "[Al Qaeda Rehab Includes Spa Treatments, Family Fun Time in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Fox News*, May 26, 2013; and Michael J. Williams, and Samuel C. Lindsey, "[A social psychological critique of the Saudi terrorism risk reduction initiative](#)," *Psychology, Crime & Law*, Vol. 20, Iss. 2 (2014): p138.

⁴⁵ The specific rehabilitation program referred to here is the Saudi program, mentioned above in endnote 44. In addition to the deterrent technique mentioned in endnote 44, the Saudis use social relationships at a deterrent through a procedure I refer to as "family collateral." According to the late Christopher Boucek, who toured the Saudi rehabilitation center as a researcher several times, "When a detainee is furloughed [temporarily released] for family events such as weddings or funerals, three family members must come forward and guarantee his return; should he not return, those three family members would have to take his place." Gunaratna, Rohan, Jolene Jerard, and Lawrence Rubin. 2011. *Terrorist Rehabilitation and Counter-Radicalisation New Approaches to Counter-Terrorism*. London: Routledge, page 87.

With regards to "additional means of surveillance," the Saudi program also uses family members to act as eyes and ears on the behalf of authorities. In 2009, the director of the Saudi center, Sheikh Ahmed Jelani, said in an interview: "Once their trust is won, the families [of released detainees] start to provide information on their sons... after they are released, whether [it be] positive or

negative.” El-Said, Hamed and Jane Harrigan. 2012. *Deradicalising Violent Extremists: Counter-radicalization and deradicalization programmes and their impact in Muslim majority states*,” London: Routledge, page 215.

⁴⁶ The most comprehensive scholarship on evaluating the effectiveness of extremist rehabilitation are Horgan, John and Kurt Braddock. 2010. “[Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalization Programs](#),” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:2, 267-291; and Williams, Michael J. and Steven M. Kleinman. 2014. “[A utilization-focused guide for conducting terrorism risk reduction program evaluations](#),” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2014.

⁴⁷ This is the subject of a widely-circulated *New York Times* article by Rukmini Callimachi, “[ISIS and the Lonely Young American](#),” *New York Times*, June 27, 2015.

⁴⁸ According to The Soufan Group, the current estimate of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria is between 27,000 and 31,000 individuals, representing 86 countries – almost a three fold increase from The Soufan Group’s estimate of 12,000 in June 2014. “[Foreign Fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria](#),” The Soufan Group, December 2015.