# Terrorist Dropouts:

## Learning from Those Who Have Left

by Michael Jacobson **(/experts/michael-jacobson)** , George Selim **(/experts/george-selim)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Jacobson (/experts/michael-jacobson)

Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence.

George Selim (/experts/george-selim)

George Selim is director for community partnerships on the White House's National Security Staff.

Brief Analysis

On January 21, 2010, Michael Jacobson, George Selim, and Mark Williams addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Jacobson, a senior fellow in the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, previously served as counsel on the 9-11 Commission and as a senior advisor in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. Mr. Selim is a senior policy advisor in the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, where he counsels the leadership on policy issues at the intersection of civil rights and homeland security. Mr. Williams has served since March 2008 as the U.S.-based representative of the United Kingdom's Office of Security and Counterterrorism, the organization with primary responsibility for the UK's counterterrorism and counterradicalization strategy. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Michael Jacobson

In recent years, many in Washington and abroad have devoted increasing attention to understanding radicalization. Although this is a positive development, looking at the flip side of the phenomenon -- individuals who have left terrorist and extremist organizations -- is equally important. There are plenty of candidates to study. Al-Qaeda has been plagued by defections since its earliest days, as have its affiliates (e.g., Jemah Islamiyah in Indonesia) and other Islamist extremist groups (e.g., Hizb al-Tahrir). In al-Qaeda's case, past dropouts tended to be lower-level operatives, but more recently, high-level leaders and key ideologues have begun to turn against the organization as well. Although the decision to defect can stem from a wide variety of factors, a few characteristic patterns do emerge upon examination of individual cases.

In recent years, ideologues and former leaders who have renounced al-Qaeda have all cited its misinterpretation of Islam as one of their primary motivations. Former Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (a.k.a. Dr. Fadl) called al-Qaeda's terrorist actions "reprehensible" in his recent book attacking the group. Nasir Abbas left Jemah Islamiyah in part because he disagreed with the notion that attacking civilians was religiously acceptable. Other ideological factors that have contributed to disillusionment include objection to the group's general direction, loss of confidence in its leadership, and frustration with its hypocrisy.

Mundane factors can cause defections as well. In some cases, terrorists drop out due to financial concerns, because they believe they are not being properly compensated for their "work." Others may hold a glorified view of what terrorist life will entail and are inevitably disappointed when their expectations are unmet. External factors such as family pressure or a change in circumstances may also give them second thoughts about the terrorist or extremist path. Once such individuals leave the insulated world of terrorist training camps and reunite with their family in mainstream society, their perspective can sometimes change.

Policymakers should bear several considerations in mind when examining the phenomenon of terrorist and extremist dropouts. The decision to leave is not always straightforward, and the path away from radicalization is often bumpy -- in some cases, individuals have left and then returned, only to leave again. Furthermore, disengaging from a group is not necessarily the same as deradicalizing one's beliefs. Many dropouts may sever ties with a radical group but still hold radical views. Even so, many individuals have left terrorist groups with no negative repercussions, including Jamal al-Fadl, an operative who embezzled more than $100,000 from al-Qaeda. In addition, the defection of key leaders and ideologues often has a significant impact on an organization's overall health and status.

Mark Williams

Al-Qaeda poses the greatest terrorist threat to the United Kingdom. Since 2001, authorities have discovered more than a dozen terrorist plots aimed at the UK and convicted more than 200 people of terrorism-related crimes.

To address these problems, the UK has developed a counterterrorism strategy known as CONTEST, which sets out how the government sees the threat and organizes its response. The main goal is to reduce the risk of international terrorism for the UK and its interests overseas. The response to such threats is organized into four pillars: pursue, protect, prepare, and prevent.

The "prevent" strand is aimed at stopping individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism. This $225 million strategy has five key elements: challenging ideology and supporting mainstream voices; disrupting those who promote terrorism; supporting vulnerable individuals; increasing community resilience; and addressing grievances. These goals are shared across the nation -- each of the nine regional government offices has a "prevent team," and local authorities act in support of this agenda as well, with 300 police officers devoted exclusively to the prevent program. On the community level, the program seeks to strengthen mainstream Muslim voices through media training, youth activities, and efforts to educate schools, universities, and prisons about the potential for radicalization in their institutions. On the national level, the prevent strategy calls for the use of immigration powers to deport or bar entry by terrorism promoters and other radicalized individuals.

These components are bolstered by improved research and communication, particularly strategic communications. For example, the UK recently established the Research, Information and Communications Unit to ensure that government offices can appropriately relate to their audience and use language that creates goodwill and avoids provocation. This program has been controversial, however. In many cases, Muslim groups have refused to accept funding labeled as "counter-extremism" assistance, and false accusations have emerged that the program is used to spy on Muslim communities. In other instances, the program has called for actions that tend to have adverse implications for the prevent agenda, such as making arrests. Nevertheless, despite its complexities and relative newness, the prevention strategy is growing and improving as it matures.

George Selim

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for a variety of counterterrorism issues. These include enhancing the capacity of the department and its partners to respond to violent extremism; conducting outreach and constructively engaging with key communities; facilitating communication and the sharing of best practices

between domestic and international agencies, private-sector entities, and nongovernmental stakeholders; and building a sophisticated understanding of violent extremism. Toward this end, the DHS has developed educational and training materials for its entire workforce of more than 215,000 people, introduced tools for improved sharing of regional and national assessments, and created analytical products related to violent extremism.

Regarding outreach, the department's efforts are aimed at countering negative perceptions of government efforts. The DHS accomplishes this goal by informing key communities of the its activities, addressing their concerns, facilitating efforts to engage them as full partners in shared national goals, and protecting civil rights. The department also conducts programs to gain cultural insights from at-risk groups and talk to communities about the role they play in promoting dialogue. For example, the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties hosts and participates in regular roundtables between government officials and representatives from the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, Middle Eastern, and South Asian American communities, in addition to making presentations at significant conferences and events, engaging with youths, and working with local nongovernmental organizations and other civil society groups. Although counterradicalization is not the direct focus of these activities, they can help prevent the alienation that often leads to violent extremism.

The DHS also conducts in-depth analysis and sponsors research aimed at understanding the techniques used to support violent extremism. Specifically, the department has worked to improve its intelligence analysis efforts and backed long-term academic research into the ever-changing phenomenon. The DHS believes that it is important to invest time in engaging key communities and the broader public, whether by providing information or responding to concerns.

Another crucial element in the U.S. counterterrorism strategy is transatlantic cooperation. In 2003, the United States and UK established the Joint Contact Group to facilitate cooperation on domestic security issues. In turn, this body created a government-to-government agreement on sharing information about science and technology for critical infrastructure protection and other security issues.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jennifer Logan. ❖

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