

Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left

[Michael Jacobson](#)

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Why do some terrorists abandon the organizations that have trained and sponsored them, often before these recruits attempt their first attack? As the U.S. government copes with the increasing threat of "homegrown" terror and considers how to reverse radicalization, achieving an effective analysis of the dropout phenomenon takes on new urgency.

In his latest Washington Institute Policy Focus, counterterrorism expert and former treasury official Michael Jacobson boldly takes on the question of "why" terrorists drop out, with compelling real-life case studies and practical recommendations for policymakers currently shaping U.S. and overseas counterradicalization programs. Drawing on his own lengthy experience, Mr. Jacobson reviews the cases of those who have abandoned al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other like-minded organizations. He interviews former jihadists, U.S. and European officials, psychiatrists and psychologists, community workers, academics, and other experts in terrorism studies. Mr. Jacobson concludes that although no single reason explains why individuals leave terrorist groups, counterterrorism officials who consider the wide variety of triggers that motivate recruits to break away can design effective programs to encourage and even accelerate the dropout phenomenon.

Winning the war on terror will require a multifront effort. The conclusions of this study should give those fighting on the frontline of counterradicalization much cause for optimism.

THE AUTHOR

Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and a former Soref fellow at the Institute. His areas of focus include sanctions and financial measures to combat national security threats, as well as other issues related to counterterrorism, national security law, and intelligence reform -- subjects covered in his 2006 Institute monograph [The West at War: U.S. and European Counterterrorism Efforts, Post-September 11](#). Mr. Jacobson was previously with the Treasury Department, where he served for two years as a senior advisor in the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI). In that capacity, he fulfilled a wide range of responsibilities, including involvement in the office's strategic planning, priorities, and budget. He was also a liaison to TFI's congressional oversight committees, to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and to the National Counterterrorism Center. He previously served as counsel on the 9-11 Commission. [Read a related op-ed by the author on ForeignPolicy.com.](#)

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