

# Preventing Homegrown Terrorism: Establishing a Deradicalization Program in New York State

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## Thesis

The New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) and the New York State Office of Counterterrorism (OCT) should implement a formal de-radicalization program based on the “Exit” and “Hayat” programs to decrease homegrown terrorism and protect civilians.

## Background & Analysis

In response to the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Syrian Civil War, the United States has provided training and weapons to the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Free Syrian Army. While these policies managed to stop ISIS’s expansion and even diminish its territory and strength, attacks from the group have not been contained to that region. With the internet, one of the most powerful radicalization tools,<sup>1</sup> ISIS and other extremist groups have radicalized frustrated individuals and convinced them to commit solo terrorist attacks around the world. In fact, these lone-wolf terrorist (LWT) attacks are “poised to increasingly replace group-actor terrorist attacks for the foreseeable future.”<sup>2 3</sup>

The primary targets of these strategies are young people, and parents and friends are often the first to notice changes in the radicalized person’s behavior.<sup>4</sup> As a result, they must either make the difficult decision to notify the authorities and possibly ruin the rest of the person’s life or ignore the situation, which could result in tremendous harm to other civilians. In one instance, Sal Shafi handed his son Adam over to the FBI and thought to himself, “my God, I just destroyed Adam.”<sup>5</sup> However, in most cases, family members remain silent.<sup>6</sup> According to a House Committee on Homeland Security report, around 12 percent of ISIS-related plots such as the one Adam Shafi was considering committing had targets in New York, the most for any one state.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that New York State implement an alternative method to prevent homegrown terrorism.

## Talking Points

- Without a formal de-radicalization program, the United States and New York are setting themselves up for disaster, as lone-wolf terrorist attacks are expected to increasingly replace group-actor terrorist attacks in the future.<sup>8</sup>
- Family and community members who know about an individual’s radicalization must choose between informing the authorities and possibly ruining that person’s life or ignoring the situation and potentially harming other civilians.
- Current methods of countering homegrown terrorism are inherently discriminatory.
- Addressing radicalization not just as a national security concern but also as a treatable mental health issue could lead to more humane treatment of terrorism suspects.

## Policy Idea

The German-based Hayat and Exit programs focus on information and family-oriented counseling to discover the underlying reasons behind the radicalization and provide psychological assistance and legal mediation. This program has been exported to Britain and there are plans to implement it in Australia and Canada.<sup>9</sup> The OMH and the OCT should, with assistance from experts at Hayat Germany, recreate the program here and make it available to all NYS residents. This can be done by amending New York Codes, Rules and Regulations (NYCRR) Title 14 to include de-radicalization programs to the jurisdiction of the Department of Mental Hygiene (DMH).

## Policy Analysis

Other attempts at countering LWT have remained largely ineffective because there isn't clear leadership in coordinating strategy.<sup>10</sup> As a result, various departments and agencies nationwide and locally have approached the issue differently. For example, the New York Police Department uses comprehensive surveillance and intelligence gathering based on individual profile analysis of LWT cases.<sup>11</sup> This policy is troubling for numerous reasons. Even though the NYPD report on radicalization concedes that there is no effective way of profiling because LWTs come from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds,<sup>12</sup> it encourages profiling by unfairly suggesting that certain "signatures" exist in the radicalization process, such as "religious conduct" and "expressive activity" in young Muslim-Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Aside from its potential implications for civil liberties, the Institute of Homeland Security finds that profiling has stopped 19 percent of terrorist plots in the United States.<sup>14</sup> However, the same report finds that 40 percent of foiled terrorist plots come from targeted observations and tips from community members.<sup>15</sup> However, in 63 percent of cases, people close to the radicalized individual were verbally told about the terrorist plot, meaning 23 percent more could have been reported.<sup>16</sup> This implies that other potential terrorist plots could be foiled by making it easier for community members to report them, allowing law enforcement in the future to replace existing discriminatory methods.

This is exactly the problem Hayat and Exit targeted by establishing emergency helplines for these situations. They provide free counseling to families conducted by experts on extremism (Islamic for Hayat, Right-Wing for Exit). In terms of treatment, Exit has a 2 percent recidivism rate in over 500 cases.<sup>17</sup> They have been praised as one of the "most successful" programs.<sup>18</sup> Its success has been attributed to its extensive use of ideology in counseling, and its structure which encourages exchange between practitioners and researchers to constantly improve methods of de-radicalization.<sup>19</sup> There is currently no scientific data on Hayat, but it is similar in structure and use of ideology to Exit.

## KEY FACTS

- ▶ LWT attacks are 16 times more common now in the United States than in 1950.<sup>20</sup> The comprehensive surveillance and intelligence gathering programs that are currently implemented has stopped 19 percent of foiled terrorist plots compared to the 40% from targeted observations and tips.<sup>21</sup>
- ▶ In 63 percent of cases, family and friends were verbally told by the individuals of their intention to participate in terrorism-related activities.<sup>22</sup>
- ▶ The Exit program has obtained a 2 percent recidivism rate over 500 cases because of its unique structure and extensive use of ideology.

## Next Steps

The New York State legislature should amend the law to add de-radicalization programs to the jurisdiction of the DMH. This will allow the New York State Office of Mental Health to set up such a program throughout the state. The Office of Mental Health should immediately contact the experts at the Hayat and Exit programs and ask them to come to the United States to assist with the project as they did in Britain.<sup>23</sup> The New York State Office of Counterterrorism should assist in establishing the program by creating a surveillance system to ensure radicalized individuals do not travel outside the United States and implementing the emergency helpline, combining it with existing tip lines and marketing the availability of such a service.

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