



Radicalization and De-Radicalization (3/22/2018)

00:00:25 Clifford Chanin: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Clifford Chanin. I'm deputy director of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. We'd like to welcome you to this webstream on radicalization and deradicalization. A small amount of context-- usually we do these streams as our live public programs.

Because of the snow in New York, we are, we've had to cancel the program itself, but we did not want to lose the opportunity to speak with Daniel Koehler, who joins us today. Hany Farid, who was to be the other panelist, will be rescheduled for a future conversation. But Daniel having come all the way from Germany, we very much wanted to take advantage of his presence and have this very important conversation anyway.

00:01:08 I will give a brief introduction to Daniel Koehler, who studied religion, political sciences, and economics at Princeton and at the Free University of Berlin. After his postgraduate program in master of... master's degree in peace and security studies at the University of Hamburg-- he specialized there, terrorism, radicalization, and deradicalization. Worked then as a deradicalization and family counselor in a number of programs.

00:01:38 He's the co-founder of the first peer-reviewed, open-access journal on deradicalization, which is www.journal-derad.com, and he created this journal with the German Institute on Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies. In June 2015, Daniel was named a Fellow of the George Washington University Program on Extremism at the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security.

00:02:08 In 2016-- and we'll talk about this during the conversation-- he was appointed to be the first court expert on deradicalization in the U.S., and this appointment was made in the Federal District Court in Minneapolis. He has since conducted risk assessment and deradicalization evaluations of terrorist offenders in prison and outside, and trained expert personnel from various U.S. government agencies.

00:02:35 Since 2016, he's also worked with the Ministry of the Interior in Baden-Wurttemberg and Stuttgart, helped coordinate statewide—in Germany-- prevention networks against violent extremism and radicalization. And just last July, he became a member of the editorial board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. Welcome. Thank you very much for joining us.

00:03:01 Daniel Koehler: Thank you, it's an honor to be here.

Clifford Chanin: Um, what I wanted to talk about, going back, is your first work in this field of radicalization and deradicalization, and I assume it's a twin field. There are experts... You're expert in one...

Daniel Koehler: Mm-hmm.

Clifford Chanin: ...you're necessarily expert in the other side of the coin. But your first work came in looking at skinheads and neo-Nazis in Germany, and I wanted to know whether it was just a very natural transition for you into work with people who were being radicalized in an Islamist context, or were there differences?

00:03:38 Daniel Koehler: Well, the... First of all, I have to say that this work related to far-right extremists or neo-Nazis, white supremacists in Germany, actually goes, goes a lot, lot deeper than in the years when I started it, because I was growing up in Germany, in, in eastern Germany, in the state of Brandenburg, where neo-Nazi skinheads were actually part of the youth subcultures. They were completely normal at that time when I was

growing up there and doing my A Levels degree at the high school, so they were, continuously around. You actually got used to them, to these individuals, and actually knew the, the individuals, the biographies, the persons behind the outfit, the clothing.

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So when I started studying religion, politics, and economics--and if you mix these three in... these three things, you automatically end up with terrorism, the Middle Eastern conflict, extremism. So, I figured that the, the way the researchers, the academia talks about terrorists, extremists, violent extremism very much differs from the reality of the persons, how they are and how they talk about themselves, how they see themselves.

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So when I was going into the practitioner field, and I got to know former neo-Nazis, former white supremacists, they were actually a lot different from the typical neo-Nazi that, that was described to me in, in university time.

Clifford Chanin: What's the difference?

Daniel Koehler: So, in Germany, when we think about far-right extremists and neo-Nazis, many people will think about these persons as, as having defects—some kind of social diseases. They come from broken family backgrounds, having alcohol problems, violence in their upbringing, have been beaten as children, so we would try to fix them.

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We would try for... We would try to find the point where they have been broken in their biography, but many of the individuals I met, both in my, my own teenage years and then after my university degrees, were actually normal individuals. They were, they had goals. They had ideas that came-- many of them came from well backgrounds and families that were well educated. Some studied at the university, even at the time when they were in the white supremacist network, so, they were very much different.

00:05:52 They were normal individuals with very different political ideas and values, and I tried to bring these, these contrasting images together that I had to bridge the academic perspective on violent extremism and radicalization and the practical, real-world examples of these individuals. So I tried to figure out what, what we can do from the academic perspective to enhance and facilitate processes leaving these individuals, these movements, and these ideologies behind.

00:06:22 Clifford Chanin: Let me just ask-- and it skips way ahead to the current day, and doesn't even talk about the immediate subject of our conversation-- but when you observe the rise of the alt-right and these white supremacy movements in the United States now, does it remind you of that gap between what the understanding was, academically, of the German neo-Nazi or skinhead groups, and what your practical understanding was at that time? Do we have that gap in knowledge here in the U.S., do you think, or is there an understanding of this phenomenon?

00:06:52 Daniel Koehler: At least the widespread surprise, the shock that I perceived when the alt-right movement and different aspects of it became widely publicly known, reminded me of different phases in Germany, as well. Even when, when the wider public discovered after the Charlottesville attack, for example, that there's a massive potential for violence and terrorism from the white supremacist environment, and, and most people were shocked that this was actually happening and these individuals were doing that. They were conducting vehicle-borne terror attacks.

00:07:24 And this reminded me of the German situation, as well, so our general underestimation of the potential for violence, aggression, hatred, terrorism from another side of the violent extremist spectrum has contributed, at least in Germany, to that, um, to that different threat perception.

Since 9/11, at least in Germany, authorities, the, the researchers, the public perception was always figured or focused on terror threats from the jihadi environment, but not so much from the white supremacist

environment. I don't know if you know that, but in Germany, in 2011, they discovered a clandestine neo-Nazi terrorist cell called the National Socialist Underground that had been active for more than 13 years bombing and killing individuals, and the...

00:08:11 At that time, the German federal prosecutor general called that event our 9/11, so the, the widespread shock about the large-scale underestimation of the terror threat from the extreme right in Germany is something that I actually see mirrored in the reaction of the wider U.S. public to the alt-right movement.

00:08:31 Clifford Chanin: You know, you said something back at the beginning, in terms of your experience growing up in East Germany, and finding these skinhead and other right-wing racist radicals as sort of just a part of the environment, that... I don't know whether you meant that their ideas didn't stand out or just, they were another group of kids who just happened to believe what they believed. But it does indicate that, as for, for young people, these kinds of extreme views may fit into an environment if there are enough of them and it just becomes normalized. Or am I misunderstanding what you meant?

00:09:08 Daniel Koehler: Exactly. At that time, they were the leading youth subculture, so, their different... It's almost like a marketplace of groups you can hang out with, or different styles-- music, clothing-- groups you can associate with, to spend your free time with. And if you have, at a certain time or certain village or certain area, only one or two youth subculture groups, sometimes they even interlock into an ideological, motivated struggle.

00:09:40 They have enemy pictures of each other. That can actually lead—either be alone, or become the natural enemy of these white supremacist groups, or join them to be protected, to have friends, to take part in the social life of a certain environment, of a certain village or a certain area. And at that time, where I was growing up, it was... There, there weren't many choices of youth subculture groups you could join, and either you, you stay out of the way, or you would join them, or you would join the groups that were their enemies, basically.

00:10:11 Clifford Chanin: Well, it ties now to the question I asked initially, which is, you know, what is the practical link, as you see it, between the pull of some groups of people into these right-wing movements, and the pull of people into these jihadi movements? Is it the same phenomenon, or are there differences?

Daniel Koehler: From my perspective and my experiences, the psychological processes behind these, these mechanisms leading people into extremist environments is the same. Of course, they're different symptoms, they're different paces, they're different styles of that process, but the psychological process behind that I would describe as a process of depluralization of political values and ideas.

00:10:52 So, on the one hand, we see individuals who less and less and less perceive alternative definitions of their core political ideas and values, like justice, freedom, honor, and alternative solutions to the main problems in their life-- what they perceive, their grievances, their frustrations. And on the other side, we see an increasing ideological urgency to do something, to tackle these problems, be it the perceived fight of the, of the evil, the infidels against Islam, or about the threat by immigrants against your race and your ethnic group.

00:11:28 There are different grievances and threats that are constantly being increased and, and focused upon within violent extremist groups, and these individuals develop a extreme sense of urgency. Now is the time to do something. Now we have to stage the revolution. Now we have to fight back, now we have to destroy evil. Our women and children are dying every day in Syria and Iraq, and we have to go to defend them. These are our brothers and sisters.

00:11:51 So there's an intense urgency. These teenagers that I've been getting to know for my work and their families described to me that they, at a certain time, they can't even eat and sleep. They are completely anxious, they are... They are almost torn apart internally because they know they

have... It's something they have to do. Their identity, their understanding of themselves, dictates to them that they have to act in a certain way.

00:12:18 They have to protect women and children in Syria, otherwise, they wouldn't be a good Muslim as the way they understand it, but they are looking for ways to, to tackle that frustration, tackle their problem. And these violent extremist groups give them tools, give them opportunities, to solve these problems, to change the world.

00:12:35 Clifford Chanin: There, there's... There's an idealism in here, it seems. So, whether you are drawn—and these are young people, principally young men, we're talking about-- but we can talk about the diversity of the group afterwards. But whether you're drawn, on the one hand, towards a Nazi ideology of protecting the race in Germany, or wherever, or whether you're drawn to a jihadi ideology of protecting the Muslim Ummah around the world or in your community, wherever, those seem to be the same things in terms of the idealistic framing of it, but what is the crossing point into action or violence?

00:13:12 Daniel Koehler: Absolutely right. So, violent extremism of any sort does not function or work without an ideology. An ideology, which is based on ideas and values, has three main things to function, which is a problem definition, a solution, and a future vision-- where you want to end up once the problem's solved. So this triangle is self-enforcing. Once individuals have internalized that, either intellectually or emotionally, it is self-enforcing-- it drives them forward.

00:13:40 And, as I described this, this process of depluralization, once the perceived solutions, alternative solutions to their problems, to their frustrations, grievances, but also the goals and the tools that they have, combined with the ideological urgency to do... If these two processes interact and cross, the chance of violence increases, because people do not see another way out. Just to break the chains, actually, that bind you.

00:14:08 To actually do something to wake up your community, to actually completely do something that is extraordinary-- a final or fatal act of violence, or to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the terrorists.

Clifford Chanin: So, I just want to re-focus on this idea of depluralization. So, you know, in normal life, if you have a problem you're facing or if something out there in the world really bothers you, I think what you're saying is, there are various ways you could respond to this. >>

Daniel Koehler: Exactly, yeah.

00:14:36 Clifford Chanin: But this process that you describe as depluralization, this is the way in which all of your energy and response to whatever the problem is focuses on one thing that, when it becomes dangerous, is guided by these ideologies, a sense of urgency, and it becomes, I guess, the only solution, to turn to violence. Is that a fair sense of it?

00:14:58 Daniel Koehler: Yes. Exactly, and tied to that are our understanding of key concepts-- how we structure the world around us. Every one of us has a set of certain ideals and values that we use to make sense of the world. And usually, I say things like justice, honor, or pride. And we all would agree that we could find a certain core understanding of what justice means or injustice means, but we would also say that it's virtually impossible to find individuals who have the exact same, letter-by-letter understanding of what justice and injustice means for each of us.

00:15:36 Radicalized or extremist individuals have a 100% depluralized understanding of these core values. They would say only what, what ISIS or what al-Qaeda or other extremist groups say what justice means, by the letter, is actually justice. And whatever does not fit into that definition is completely out of my... Not even perceived anymore as an... as an alternative understanding of the concept. And by that, my toolkit, my toolbox to solve problems, frustrations, grievances, just shrinks down continuously. And at the end, I'm just left with a hammer, basically.

00:16:11 Clifford Chanin: And so, I mean, I think about, you know, our work here and telling the story of 9/11, and we have had to confront this sort of very difficult conclusion that-- and it comes right to your point-- that when we talk about the 19 hijackers and why they did what they did, it is a reflection of an idealistic vision. You don't plan to take over airplanes and fly them into buildings as a random act or as one option among many. It really comes down to this view that, somehow, you come to believe that this is a good thing or the right answer to the problem you're trying to solve.

00:16:49 Daniel Koehler: Or the only necessary thing that actually helps, in their mindsets, to achieve the goal. So, in the end, of course, we know that, from many studies, that the majority of terrorists and violent extremists who are engaged in, in groups and international terrorism are very rational, normal individuals who strategically work to achieve a certain goal. So they have to be sane individuals to plot and plan and prepare for a long time for a complex operation like that.

00:17:20 Clifford Chanin: What about the individuals that you've studied gives you-- if there is anything-- a clue to whether or not they are personally willing to make the turn to violence? In other words, I assume that there's kind of a winnowing process along the way, that there might be some larger group that says, "Oh, these ideas could be interesting to me," a smaller group that says, "You know, I really believe that," but an even smaller group that says, "Not only do I believe it, but I must act on behalf of these ideas." Can you identify factors that keep people within those groups? Or is it a much more fluid transition from one phase to another?

00:17:57 Daniel Koehler: I think it's more fluid. It's a back-and-forth process. It's not a one-way direction. So, individuals make certain decisions, perceive their environment, their, the world around them in a certain way. There are certain external influences, like events or traumatizing things that happen to you, that impact you and push you in a certain direction.

And then these individuals themselves, they're not alone. They have comrades within the group, and the group itself that sometimes responds to individual grievances, even day-to-day feelings of, now they feel more

energized or more down. They, they have... They have certain tasks they need to perform, they feel emboldened or not.

00:18:39 So the group is constantly interacting with its own members. The ideology's even a fluid thing. So don't think that their understanding of the jihadi ideology or the theology behind that is coherent or structured or aligned with the group. So even within the group, we see a lot of fluid interaction of dynamic development. I've seen it, the same thing, with jihadi environments and far-right extremist environments, where they constantly debate and discuss certain tenets of the ideology. They build, they structure, they develop their own understanding of the world they're in.

00:19:14 So it's a constant back-and-forth, and I think that they are-- I've never seen any... even, even closely, something that resembles the profile of the potential terrorist or a violent individual. They are all very different. They come from very different backgrounds. The majority of them, the vast majority, has... is very rational, and sane. They don't have any mental health issues.

00:19:38 Clifford Chanin: So, we... You've talked about the sense of belonging, and the sense of urgency, and whenever these cases crop up, we hear about the families or the community that these kids were in, whether it's the school community, the religious community, the social networking community they were a part of, but families, in particular, come into scrutiny. I mean, "How could you not know that your son, your daughter, was planning to do this? How is it possible you're living under the same roof, and you didn't know?" Yet, they didn't know.

00:20:11 Daniel Koehler: Um, that's... I think this is an extremely important question, and I've been involved in creating a network called Mothers for Life, which is a network of parents of mostly deceased foreign fighters from now 12 countries in the world, and these parents, I help them. Some, I counsel as-- to become family counselors themselves. They interact with other families who are currently actively being impacted by violent radicalization processes in their own midst, and I've, um, I've collected these stories.

00:20:43 I've heard these stories a lot, that many parents would say they perceived a certain change. They were feeling that something is not going right, but they couldn't interpret it. They couldn't understand what was happening. They had never the sense where, actually, it was leading, but they knew something was going on. Something was changing. To a certain degree that sometimes, even their own kids would say, "I want to go to Syria. I have to do something. I have to protect these women and children."

00:21:10 But they never considered their own children to be potential members of a terrorist organization, and I've trained a couple of these parents as counselors for others, and I've heard this sentence more than once: "If I would have known now what... If I would have known then what I know now, my son, my daughter would still be alive."

Clifford Chanin: Well, what is the "then" that they don't know, and what now, having gone through the training, do they learn?

00:21:34 Daniel Koehler: It's the specific driving factors, this ideological urgency, the depluralization, that they understand where it drives them, and the pull, the immense power behind these narratives that organizations like ISIS or white supremacist groups present, what they promise to these kids, to immediately change the world, to participate in larger-than-life narratives and, and mythical stories, even, to become eternal heroes in their own supernatural war of good against evil, and many parents actually, counterintuitively, or counterproductively, reacted by repression, by reacting angrily when they were provoked, or by simply banning them from meeting certain people and made them refocus on their school education, or their future careers.

00:22:26 And of course, these kids, when they are completely, completely focused on the suffering of women and children in Syria, for example, and the parents tell them, "Yeah, just finish your high school, college, then you can, maybe, think about helping these individuals; now, this is more important," completely misses the point of the world, the reality where

these kids are currently living in, and the pull, the power of these narratives.

- 00:22:52 So that, plus, of course, "Where and how can I get help?" It's one thing for these parents to recognize it, and a second thing, "What do I do with it? Do I call the police? Do I call the FBI? Who do I call? Do I call the imam?" Uh, and most of these individuals will say, "It's none of my business. They haven't done anything illegal." Um, and right so; the FBI is right to say, for many of these cases, "They have not done anything illegal. We cannot pick them up, we cannot charge them. We cannot investigate them."
- 00:23:21 So there's a gap, especially in countries like the U.S., there's a gap of community engagement, community programs that can pick up these cases and help these families to become living counter-narratives on their own. And this is the idea of family counseling, and there are many terms, like countering violent extremism, or rehabilitation and reintegration, prevention work.
- 00:23:42 If, essentially, what it does, all these tools, what they're doing is to help communities help families to become a counterforce against this pull, and many families need to realize that, first of all, it can happen to anyone. It's not particularly prone to certain backgrounds, a certain social background or economic background.
- 00:24:03 Second, these individuals and their communities and families are up against organizations that are much more sophisticated in recruitment, in terms of the technical capabilities, their, their funding, the networks they have, than, usually, what families and communities have in their own repository.
- 00:24:21 Clifford Chanin: So you're talking now about the social media, and the technological outreach by these groups. And it sounds from reading some of the materials that we had on background here, that there is this kind of replacement underway so that the social groups that kids grow up with, whether it's families or friends, somehow-- because of the factors

you've been describing-- they find a social alternative online that gives them a way of channeling their feelings that, "This is an urgent problem," that, "My family doesn't understand me."

00:24:54 I mean, some of this is just typical teenage stuff, but if it's channeled in this direction, it's extremely dangerous. But the outreach through social media and what you can fundamentally get online is where these, ISIS, in particular, has had its greatest success in reaching out and creating these so-called lone wolf terrorists.

00:25:18 Daniel Koehler: The term "lone wolf," I would really, really be very careful about, because I don't think it actually exists. We do have lone actors who commit acts of terrorism or violence on their own, but, essentially, these individuals had to interact with other human beings through social media or offline, and this interaction with other human beings is what actually propels the violent radicalization process to a certain degree, so I don't think that lone wolves actually exist.

00:25:47 People do not radicalize to a point where they use violence completely on their own without ever having talked to other human beings. And social media is, is a highway, basically. It connects individuals in an instant with each other around the globe, and it's a huge marketplace to, to shop for certain ideas and values that fit my own understanding of the world, of my grievances and my ideas and values, and actually, it helps organizations like ISIS, al-Qaeda, or white supremacist groups to market their solutions, and they've done that. ISIS has done that exceptionally well. They have... They have succeeded in turning terrorist recruitment radicalization into a mass product by their propaganda, by their technical proficiency in using the social media.

00:26:37 Clifford Chanin: Can you describe, you know, what makes their, ISIS's productions so effective?

Daniel Koehler: First of all, the technical quality of the videos, of the high-glossy magazines, of the products that they have produced. Of course, there's a certain change recently. There was a huge decrease of the

output, basically, and then, a little bit increase again. But essentially, it's the technical quality, the way they produce the videos on a Hollywood-level quality, that basically shows these teenagers what they are used to when they were playing "Call of Duty" or watching Hollywood blockbusters. The level of technical quality that they're used to, they've found that with ISIS materials as well, first of all. So they saw, technically, these folks knew what they were doing.

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Clifford Chanin: So it's a kind of normalization of simply the same kind of material you're used to seeing elsewhere, interacting with, now it's in this realm, as well.

Daniel Koehler: Yes, in a certain way, they have grown to-- because they had the financial resources, and the technical skills of individuals to produce material ranging from documentary-length movies, on video games, music videos, you name it. Every kind of media that teenagers are used to consume, they-- ISIS-- produce their own version of it.

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And second, the way the organization understood how social media works, like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media, or messenger, um, applications, like WhatsApp, Telegram, and others, the way they used it, the way they used it to spread their message to a maximum degree was, at that point, um... It was connecting to a certain tradition within the jihadist environment, but it was much more successful and sophisticated.

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They flooded, basically, they flooded the world with their propaganda output, and they even weaponized Western media against us. They knew exactly what to do to get media interest, to be portrayed as the most evil, the most brutal, the most, um, the leading jihadi organization, and thereby constantly staying in the talk, staying in focus in our own societies, and there is work being done on the media strategy, the propaganda strategy of ISIS, which actually includes weaponizing, using the Western media against the West.

00:29:01 Clifford Chanin: So how can you define the problem? You're working here in the U.S., and I want to come to the case in Minnesota, which is a very good example of breaking all this down, but sticking to Europe, which I think has produced a greater number of recruits to go to ISIS in the caliphate-- when it existed-- so that travel and then, now, the return, can you put some numbers on this, whether only in Germany—which is your home country-- or on a continental basis?

00:29:29 Daniel Koehler: So, looking at Germany since the Syrian civil war broke out and ISIS really became a international, um... It became a, it had an international focus, 960, about 960 Germans have left to join one of the oppositionist group-- mostly ISIS. About 300, 350 have returned so far.

So, this is about the number we're dealing with in Germany, and other countries in Western Europe are roughly similar, I think. I think France and U.K. are dealing with a couple of more, but even countries as small as Denmark or Netherlands have faced, per capita, very significant numbers of foreign fighters.

00:30:11 But even that's nothing compared to the numbers of fighters from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia-- so the close-proximity countries, where they are multiple, in the thousands, individuals have joined and gone back and forth. So this is about, at least in Germany, the number that the authorities are safe to assume.

00:30:28 Clifford Chanin: Is this, in your mind, a separate problem from the radicalization process of a teenager who doesn't get over there, for whatever reason-- either logistically, or a change of heart, or is discovered... You know, some kid sitting in Berlin may want to go but can't. Does that kid pose a different problem than a fighter who has been to the Islamic State and come back with battlefield experience or whatever training they had, and now is picking up residence in his or her country of origin?

00:31:00 Daniel Koehler: Yeah, there was this argument a couple of years ago in Europe to just let them go. It doesn't make any sense to stop them,

because then they feel—would feel-- imprisoned, and they would act more violently and aggressively, because they want to go there, think it's their perfect state, and their paradise, to want to go.

But then the authorities in these societies realized that each instance of-- or each case of a person leaving-- ruptures the communities, ruptures the families. They still have contact with their families, other family members. They use their skills, for example, to produce German-language jihadi propaganda, so by their stories, they continue to have an effect on their home countries, on their home communities and their families.

00:31:46 Plus, the families and communities would always perceive that individual being allowed to leave as a massive failure of the law enforcement agencies and a betrayal of trust. And I've heard the story, as well, many families say, "The intelligence community, police, they knew. They were watching my son. They knew that he was planning to leave, watched him leaving, watched him entering Syria, and then they informed me that he was with ISIS."

00:32:13 And this betrayal of trust, as they perceive it, as these families perceive it, has completely eroded their willingness to cooperate or to call out when they see another case like that. So as to intervene and to prevent these processes as early as possible, both makes us more efficient in the long run, when we still can work with the communities, when we still can work with the families, and statutory and non-statutory services that we have available, and not just waiting for them to come back when we don't know actually what happened in the years when they were there.

00:32:48 Maybe they have been trained or traumatized. Even if individuals are forced to stay in their home countries and undergoing prosecution, maybe sent to jail because they were convicted of material support for a terrorist organization, even that, I think, is potentially better for us because we have time to work with them and we have all the resources and networks available.

When people come back, we have this gap of knowledge. They have new networks, new friends, new experience that we don't know nothing about, so I would always prefer working with someone who is staying in this country, in their home countries, even if they would want to go, than with someone who comes back.

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Clifford Chanin: Is someone who comes back more difficult to deradicalize than someone who hasn't yet had that experience?

Daniel Koehler: I don't think you can generalize that. Depends on the individual. Depends on the reasons why they left, why they are coming back. If they left because they were looking for camaraderie and honor and, and looking for helping to defend women and children, and they are coming back because they were disillusioned and traumatized, and they saw that ISIS is not fulfilling its promises, or were they going because they wanted to fight to... They were adventure-seekers, and then they got that, the organization broke away, and they were just sent back because they had no place to live.

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These are completely two different stories. And the same with individuals who, who stay in the home countries. Some stay because they simply don't... They don't have the guts to go to Syria, they are afraid, or people who are just taken, they have been... Taken away their passports, and they feel that they are locked up in a Westernized prison, even though they can move around.

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So, again, it depends on the individual. It depends on their motives, what I would call the radicalization recipe, the driving factors, the push and pull factors, and then you can have, in every category, can have very dangerous individuals. You can have those who have this cognitive opening, and those you can work with really well.

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Clifford Chanin: There's also the question of young children who are coming, who are being brought back by parents. So they went to whatever passes for a school in the Islamic State, and they're back home, and their school lessons in their old life were military lessons, essentially,

and now they're coming back to a civilian society that has a very different set of values. You work with those kids, as well.

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Daniel Koehler: Yes, I have been involved in a couple of cases where minors, very young children, have been either taken by their parents to the Islamic State, or have been born there and raised and socialized, and there is a whole schooling and education approach by the organization, when it was still fully functioning, starting with kindergartens, elementary schools, directly, it, it separated between young boys and girls. The boys were actually raised to become jihadi fighters and the girls were basically raised to become brides, wives.

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So there's a difference in how the organization approached these two, these two genders of kids, basically, but in the end, they were immensely brutalized. They perceived and witnessed immense acts of violence. They were basically growing up in a war zone, in a civil war zone. We have seen displays of ISIS propaganda showing kids three, four, five years old executing prisoners on a playground, being used as fighters.

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Some of them, we know that from press reports, have been forced to execute their own parents because they wanted to get them out. So, I've been involved in a couple of cases where, actually, the level of brutalization and hate that was instilled in these little kids was so intense that even for a couple of months, these kids were not able to play with other kids, because they would immediately attack them, immediately act violently against them, so they had to even cool off to, to... To relearn the way to play with other kids who were perceived to be outsiders and enemies.

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So this black and white thinking in these early years of social, socialization is extremely difficult to work with, so we're looking at potentially even a lifelong therapy and counseling with these, with these young kids.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, and what you're describing, whether for the children or for the adults, is a very long-term process. This is not something that turns around in months, it seems.

Daniel Koehler: No, no, not at all.

Clifford Chanin: Does the collapse of the Islamic State as a self-contained entity have an impact on the people you're working with? I realize the change in the narrative on behalf of the Islamic State has now reflected the fact that they don't control the territory they once did, and so there are ups and downs in their version of this story, and now we're going into a down period, but does actual failure have an impact on their appeal?

00:37:47

Daniel Koehler: I think there are a couple of... of arguments to discuss here. The first one is, how does the organization itself explain what could be seen as a failure? And they have preparing for that. They have preparing the move, as they would call, to the virtual caliphate, and, to a certain degree, their... the nimbus of being victorious part of that struggle has been taken away.

00:38:13

We have to see, for the long term, how that evolves and how that will actually change. But there are other groups, as well. There's al-Qaeda, who was permanently in the back, rebuilding, regrouping, and just waiting for that moment to come back.

So I've seen cases where, these, these teenagers basically switched from ISIS back to al-Qaeda and said, "Now we have seen that ISIS was just a big mouth and they couldn't keep their promises, so... But al-Qaeda, they are the true ones. They are keeping, keeping the fight."

00:38:42

Clifford Chanin: Has their appeal and their techniques for recruiting increased? Have they learned from the successes of ISIS in terms of their social media presence or their outreach and their image that they project in the world, al-Qaeda?

Daniel Koehler: To certain degrees, absolutely. Their media output has been more aligned to the needs and expectations of teenagers, young

adults. It got technically more proficient, but I... It seems that they lack the financial resources to actually produce anything large-scale similarly like the Islamic State, yet.

00:39:16 Clifford Chanin: Okay-- I want to turn... I mean, there's been so much to talk about that I do want to get to this. This is your role in the U.S. in a federal district court in Minneapolis, where there was the prosecution of a group of young Somali-American boys, young men, who either were planning to or were on their way, attempting to go to join the fight. Can you give us a little bit of background on the circumstances of their arrest and then how you became involved?

00:39:45 Daniel Koehler: I'm not at liberty to discuss individual cases, but it happened around 2015 that this group of youngsters was detected, prosecuted, and charged and a certain subgroup of them pled guilty and said, "Yes, actually, we, we wanted to go to join ISIS and fight."

And there were, there was a federal judge who decided that some of these kids, 18, 19, 20 years old, are facing potentially 20, 25 years in prison, essentially for booking a one-way ticket to Turkey or to, to other countries, that they were trying to go into Syria from.

00:40:25 And you realize that, essentially, they will come out at a certain point, so some of them might warrant an earlier release or counseling. At that point, in 2015, that was a completely novel approach. No one had ever, in the judicial system, thought about this and tried that, and...

Clifford Chanin: So, the normal response of the judiciary would be to send people away for long prison terms.

00:40:48 Daniel Koehler: Exactly, yes-- when it's about material support for terrorism, and I'm not a lawyer, but I was told that there are mandatory sentences without any change or any chance of early parole, or... So the judges have to give a certain amount of prison time. And of course at that

time, and still, there's virtually no deradicalization program working with long-term individuals in prison or outside.

00:41:16 So the federal court in Minneapolis started as the first judiciary in the United States to think about what they could do, and they studied European deradicalization programs, the probation office did, and they brought back lessons to the U.S., and they decided to bring me in to train probation officers in CVE, or deradicalization coordination, which was very important.

00:41:40 I didn't train probation officers to become one-on-one mentors. I trained them to structure programs, to bring in network partners, to assess impact, to figure out the radicalization recipe of these individuals, the driving factors, the push and pull factors, and that was completely new for them. They had, before that, never actually studied or thought about violent radicalization processes and the psychology behind that as a tool, as something that they as probation officers need to work on.

Clifford Chanin: If I understand correctly, just to interrupt, the judge in the case actually flew to Germany to meet you and, I assume, to observe programs before any of the sentencing happened.

Daniel Koehler: Yes, he did.

Clifford Chanin: So, he really wanted to get a sense of what are we dealing with here? How real is this? How effective can it be?

00:42:21 Daniel Koehler: Yes, actually, he did. It was Federal Judge Michael Davis who flew to Berlin and met me there. We discussed what could be done and then he invited me to come back to Minneapolis to do two things. One is the probation officer training and the other thing is to write assessment reports for each defendant that would go into the sentencing and be an additional information for the judge to understand what drove them towards ISIS.

00:42:48 What was it? Was it adventure-seeking? Was it theological argumentation? Was... Are they ideologically hardened or not? Are there any cognitive opening? Are they showing sincere remorse or not? So, he wanted actually to find out who were these individuals? What was driving them? And that was what I trying to provide, to provide an assessment about the radicalization processes, the motives, the push and pull factors, and give the judge a potential suggestion for a counseling, different elements that we could bring in if I saw an opening for that.

00:43:23 And all of these individuals are very different. They come from different backgrounds. They have different motives. And again, I cannot comment on individual cases, but I believe that was a first step into that direction, for the judiciary to consider the ideological motive. And this is a very delicate topic, and I fully understand that countries, Anglo-American countries like the U.K. or U.S. or Canada, are based on a very, very firm understanding of freedom of speech, religious opinion, political opinion.

00:43:52 And it is absolutely right that a certain ideology, certain understanding of a religion or a political system should not be targeted by the judiciary or by law enforcement, and, I think, people in the U.S. need to understand that CVE--- or deradicalization, actually-- they are there to protect these freedoms, to protect that plurality, and ideas, certain ideas, in that depluralization process actually drive towards violence and illegal behavior. So there are things that we can do before this happens, before illegal acts occur, or when they are prosecuted and convicted, while they are in prison, when they come back and out, because they are still human beings and they still exist.

00:44:36 We have to accept the fact that even though they had made the decision to go there, to go to Syria and fight with ISIS or to commit atrocities, that they will continue to exist and go back to the families, go back to the communities. So we have the chance now to work with them, to try to change them, to try to reintegrate, rehabilitate, bring them back to a plural understanding of a society, or just ignore them, wait for them to come out after 20, 25 years, and then see what happens. I would rather take the chance of being close to them and work with them.

- 00:45:12 Clifford Chanin: What does a program of deradicalization training look like in this context? So, you said the parole officers are not one-on-one counselors, but they're putting a structure of some kind together for a young person who is put into this, as opposed to a long prison term. What are the key elements that this support structure provides?
- 00:45:35 Daniel Koehler: First of all, it's understanding of psychology of radicalization and deradicalization. So how does ISIS recruit? How does the pop jihadi environment, the jihadi youth subculture, look like? How can I assess certain propaganda artifacts? How is the social media strategy of ISIS? How is, how can I work with community partners, with the family, basically, to have an effect, an impact on these trajectories, to change these trajectories?
- 00:46:06 We work with dummy case exercises, case studies, where they can apply certain tools and techniques and just try to understand the worldview of these individuals, these teenagers, as I've described to you, these push and pull factors, the drive towards justice and honor, the depluralization, and if you understand the driving factors, the mechanisms behind that-- like a technician, basically-- you can bring in tools to change the certain way these individuals are heading.
- 00:46:36 Clifford Chanin: But you're giving them people to refer to out in the community, you're giving them organizations... I mean, you are providing this alternative structure for them that gives them, hopefully, a sense of, "Wait a minute, this one single way I had of looking at both the problem and my response to the problem, that one single way is no longer convincing to me."
- 00:46:56 Daniel Koehler: That is something that I cannot do, that the probation office and the Minnesota... Minnesota community, they have to come together on their own. They have to find each other, they have to make... They have to make trust-based experience of working together on these individual cases. And basically, I teach the probation officers to fish, and

to work on in these methods, to develop them, and to find community partners.

00:47:22 So I teach them different types of potential partners and how they could fit in the potential counseling approach, and then they have to go out, look for them, but in a certain way, this is what they were doing anyway. They were-- with non-terrorist or non-extremist clients-- working the exact same way. They were looking for community partners to provide therapy, drug treatment, work training, job training, any kind of activities that they thought would help this individual to stay off the criminal life.

00:47:53 Clifford Chanin: So this is just a different set of supports that could be provided. What has been the response, generally, in Minneapolis to this, and more particularly, what's been the response within the Somali-American community, which is the community that has produced, unfortunately, many of the kids in the focus of the court?

Daniel Koehler: I found the reaction, first of all, in the, in the law enforcement and judiciary, very open, because I've... I think that they all realize that they cannot just arrest or kill their way out of this problem. They realize that there are more and more youngsters and teenagers coming after them, just wave after wave, and we have to stop the recruitment as early as possible.

00:48:34 So I've found that the judges, the probation officers, law enforcement officers incredibly committed and open, to do anything possible to strengthen communities, to empower communities and families, to stop this problem at the roots. My specific role in Minneapolis, of course, made me kind of a two-fold person. Of course, I was involved in writing assessment reports for these defendants, and of course, some of these reports were more and some were less positive, based on the interviews and the data that I gathered.

00:49:10 So I completely realize that some in the Somali communities saw me as the enemy, as part of the law enforcement communities just trying to pick on the Somali community. But I've also been contacted by parents

and family members of some of these defendants, and they asked how they can be involved, how they can be of use, to help other families, as well.

So it's an ongoing process, and a very dynamic process, and again, it wasn't my goal to come in and just build everything, give everyone the tools, but just teach them the basic ideas behind it, and so, to a certain point, they could pick it up and move on with it and develop it.

00:49:48 Clifford Chanin: Has any part of the judicial system elsewhere in the United States picked up on this?

Daniel Koehler: I've received a number of requests from other judiciaries, but usually these come from defense lawyers, and they ask me to do the assessment reports and then I have a very specific set of requirements. The first one is that my report has to be shared with the prosecutors and the judges in case I find out something negative, and usually this is not in the interest of the defense lawyers, naturally, to share a negative report with the prosecutors or the judges.

00:50:20 And second, I, as a academic, as well as a practitioner, I do not want to write a report and say, "This person is a high risk. This person is highly radicalized or not. And, no, you deal with it." I want to give recommendations what could be done, what types of counseling, what types of mentoring could be used in this case, and I need someone to pick it up, either it's a community organization or trained probation officers or whoever who wants to work with these persons after the trial is over.

00:50:52 And I find it very much disturbing that you would only use the concept of deradicalization within a trial to, basically, to get a certain sentence out of it, and then you just leave it be and walk away. So, CVE, deradicalization, whatever you want to call it, is a long-term commitment. So I usually only go in when I see that long-term commitment, when all sides of the story, including the family, the prosecutors, the judges, probation officers are on the same page, and

say, "Yes, we want to make that commitment. We want to work with these individuals. We want to help them. Even when they come out of prison after ten years, we still want to make that commitment."

00:51:33

Clifford Chanin: Let's see if there are any questions here, among our group of colleagues. Stunned silence-- oh, look, Dani. Yes, you must have a mic—you don't even have a mic. You usually have the mic.

Dani: So, earlier, you were describing social media and how it can be used as a highway towards radicalization, and it seems like there are so many ways towards radicalization, but the deradicalization process is so individualized for each person. Is there a way to use social media or other outlets to have kind of a more generalized deradicalization, or is the solution maybe just more of these very specific individualized programs? What kind of-- what do you see as a way forward for that?

00:52:17

Daniel Koehler: So, using social media as a deradicalization tool is currently being tested in some European countries with mixed results. I am skeptical about it because I... First of all, we don't even know if the person we're talking to is, does actually exist, first of all. Second, if it's a true radicalized individual or not a journalist, a government spy, someone else who's just acting as the person. I know colleagues who are journalists or law enforcement officers who all have fake accounts, as jihadis or neo-Nazis. Comes naturally with the business.

00:52:52

So, yeah, and then they could-- thirdly, they could just switch off, change the site, ignore what we are saying. We don't have-- we cannot really keep them engaged. We cannot force them to be engaged in a certain way. That being said, we have certain limitations, but understanding the CVE spectrum from what we would call primary to secondary and tertiary prevention.

00:53:13

Primary meaning early prevention, educating about the threats and risks of violent extremism, sensitive information, or raising awareness. And secondary prevention, working with so-called at-risk individuals, families with persons who are in the early stages. For these cases, I see a great

use for social media to spread counter-narratives, to spread information, and outweigh, basically, the pull of extremist organizations.

00:53:43

And there are many studies being done. There are researchers in the U.S., leading researchers, like John Horgan, Kurt Braddock, Michael Williams, who do this work on communication, counter-narratives, deradicalization programs, would teach us what we need to do, how we need to structure counter-narrative campaigns to be effective, so the art of communication in that is absolutely key, and we can use social media equally in the same way, like extremist organizations do, to interact with other human beings, to provide them with alternative solutions, alternative definitions, a more pluralist worldview, to bring more color into the black and white thinking that the other organizations try to sketch. So, yeah, we can do that the exact same way in the earlier phases of the radicalization process.

00:54:33

Woman: Thank you very much, this is absolutely fascinating.

Daniel Koehler: Thank you.

Woman: I'm wondering how effective peer-to-peer conversation is when you have somebody who has gone through a deradicalization process speaking to somebody who is, hopefully, in the process of trying to become deradicalized, or even as a preventive measure.

00:54:53

Daniel Koehler: That's an excellent question. Peer-to-peer methods and programs in the CVE or deradicalization sphere, as far as I know, are, if they exist at all, they are in the, in the early baby steps. So they, I think they have not been tried out and applied on a large scale. At least where I come from, they haven't. In the primary prevention phase, in terms of anti-aggression, anti-violence, we have a certain tradition, and I think in the U.S. as well, anti-bullying, looking out for drug abuse, for violent abuse by other kids and families.

- 00:55:31 We teach kids to look out for these things. We teach our kids to look out for drugs and for other threats, right, or child molesters. We teach them the signs when they could call us as adults. Working on the peer-to-peer basis, basically, training teenagers and kids to become mentors on their own, and defuse radicalization processes, is a very fascinating idea, and I would like to explore that.
- 00:55:59 I think it is-- there's a lot of potential in it as part of a larger scheme of more trained experts. I've been involved in Germany to train school psychologists as CVE counselors, and I think what we need in these, these instances, when we need to bring in peer-to-peer networks, is to understand the potential, but also the limits, of these peer-to-peer projects, and where we need to bring in additional support to make the whole system work.
- 00:56:26 Should it be, for example, an early warning system? Do we want these kids to call us and bring us in? Or do we want them to do a large part of the counseling themselves? I could see cases where both can apply, because these teenagers understand their reality, their worldview much better. And maybe it's a stretch, but seeing the... seeing the events in the U.S. after the recent school shootings, and this empowerment, this strong voice of teenagers, of kids to speak out against that form of violence and actually be involved in the political sphere, in the decision-making process, gives me hope that we can translate that to the field of CVE, as well.
- 00:57:07 And we shouldn't underestimate teenagers. This is exactly what groups like ISIS and white supremacist groups prey upon. That they promise to 14-, 15-, 16-year-olds to change the world, to use their technical skills, to use their ideas, their goals, their visions for themselves, and we should do the same thing. We should use their innovation, their creative power, their ideas, their visions for a positive goal, for positive gain, and give them the tools.
- 00:57:37 I've seen many cases where, for these kids, it was actually being caught up in decades of "guided education" and expectations being placed upon them, and not actually what they wanted to do for their own life, and

then an extremist group comes along saying, "Forget about all that— come with us, and we give you all that, what you need to change the world."

00:58:00

Clifford Chanin: This is so rich, there really is so much going on. And as, from what you described, this is almost the beginning of the field. This is not a, you know, a well-developed or broadly understood set of principles, so this is a conversation that I think we will continue to have with you. We are out of time, but I do want to take this moment and thank you again for coming all the way from Germany for this. I apologize again on behalf of the weather, and hope to see you again here at the museum. Please join me in thanking Daniel Koehler.

00:58:28

Daniel Koehler: Thank you, thanks.