

COMMUNITY CENTRED APPROACH TO REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF RETURNEES

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Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On September 8, 2022, Mr. Navaid Aziz, an Imam and Director at the Islamic Information Society of Calgary, presented *Community Centred Approach to Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returnees* at the 2022 CASIS Vancouver Defence and Security Advisory Network (DSAN). The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience. The key points discussed were the holistic approach involving community-based rehabilitation to help returnees reintegrate into society and utilizing a religious-based approach in addressing the role that religion had played in radicalization.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Mr. Navaid Aziz stressed the importance of a community-based approach concerning the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, stating that isolation will only harm returnees further. A community-based approach also aids in the safety of the broader Muslim community, as labelling Muslim communities as extremist hotspots counters the efforts for reintegrating the returnees.

Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Mr. Aziz discussed the role that government can play in supporting returnees and the broader Muslim community, such as reforming the criminal law to include hate crimes as a criminal charge on its own, rather than as an additional charge, as well as to create inclusive spaces, primarily in education, for individuals to thrive and find meaning within individual personal identities.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Mr. Aziz began his presentation by highlighting that the idea of developing a community centred approach to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees started back in 2015, after the first set of returnees to Calgary but before the caliphate collapsed. This approach is also based on Mr. Aziz's paper titled *A Grassroots Guide to Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Returnees & Their Children*. Mr. Aziz pointed out that during an interview with one of the first American public returnees, they had stated their wish for the Muslim community to have reached out to them and supported them with a *faith-based approach*.

Mr. Aziz stated that a community-based approach concerning rehabilitating returnees is more effective than current policies that might often leave returnees isolated. It is important to note that this community approach needs to be made in collaboration with law enforcement to ensure that investigations are not hindered. During some of the interviews that Mr. Aziz conducted, returnees stated that they wished to be a part of a community.

Mr. Aziz stated that Canada is getting closer to seeing some returnees come back and estimated that the majority would be women; there will be concerns about the safety and security of the community if they are allowed to reintegrate. However, Mr. Aziz expressed that the most important component of a community approach is ensuring the physical and mental wellbeing of the returnees for effective rehabilitation and reintegration into Canadian society.

Mr. Aziz asserted that the first step in treatment should be a physical and psychological assessment of the returnee, as well as to provide the necessary treatments. Mr. Aziz expressed that an unhealthy returnee cannot reintegrate into the community. A religious-based intervention process could help break down what role religion played in the radicalization process. Mr. Aziz stated that often, the returnees had their radicalization justified through misconstrued interpretations of religious texts.

To break down the layers of religious radicalization that may be involved, Mr. Aziz highlighted the need to counter those misconstrued interpretations by contextualizing the religious text and its true meaning in the modern world. Taking this approach can demonstrate a faithful interpretation and practice without the rhetoric that individuals aiming to radicalize others employ. With approximately 30-40 returnees estimated to arrive in Canada over the next few

months, Mr. Aziz stressed the importance of reintegrating them into the community, rather than alienating and isolating them. According to Mr. Aziz, this understanding is important considering that the desire for community possibly exacerbated their vulnerability to the radicalizing influences of extremist groups.

Question & Answer Period

Regarding policy responses, Mr. Aziz stressed the importance of bringing Canadian citizens back to Canada, as they have the right to a fair trial and due process. Mr. Aziz stated that an opportunity for redemption must be offered to returnees through the judicial system, similar to the right to a fair trial and due process given in murder cases.

Mr. Aziz also noted that the government can support returnees by reforming the law to include hate crimes as a criminal charge of its own, rather than an add-on to a separate charge. Current laws require more evidence to prove there was a hate crime, and it is left to the judge's discretion to integrate it within the sentence if found guilty.

Additionally, the government can also help create more inclusive spaces, primarily within education, to help individuals thrive in their personal identities. Mr. Aziz noted that there have been cases where returnees became radicalized after being de-radicalized and returned to Canada. However, Mr. Aziz also asserted that due to the physical and psychological harm experienced by the returnees as a result of being held in internment camps, the likelihood of returnees becoming radicalized again is very low. This risk is further mitigated when returnees are treated with a holistic, community-based approach to rehabilitation.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- A multi-pronged, community-based approach is necessary to rehabilitate returnees and aid them in reintegrating back into Canadian society.
- Physical and psychological health assessments and treatments should be prioritized before any other steps are taken.
- A religious based approach will help returnees break down the layer of radicalization that was justified through misinterpreted religious texts, and it would help returnees understand the true meaning, the context behind the text, and how to apply it to modern society.

- A holistic approach to community-based intervention is important, as it gives returnees a community to be a part of.

Question & Answer Period

- It is important to give Canadian returnees the opportunity for redemption through the judicial system, similar to the right to a fair trial and due process given in murder cases.
- The government can aid in rehabilitation by providing safe spaces, primarily in education, for individuals to express and thrive in their identities.
- There is room for the government to address hate crimes more effectively as currently, they are not a criminal charge of their own, they require more evidence to be proven, and it is up to the judge's discretion to implement them into a guilty charge.



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