

Case 6: Deradicalization through Psychosocial Therapy in Prisons



Country	Lebanon	Thematic Areas		
Organization	Rescue Me	Security	Socioeconomics	Psychology
Programme	I Know What to Tell My Brother			

Summary

Rescue Me, located in Beirut, Lebanon, is a non-profit organization with a vision of a society with safer homes, schools and communities. Founded by Nancy and Maya Yammout in 2011, Rescue Me’s mission is to undertake crime prevention through social development for a more advanced and connected community, and to improve quality of life for all by providing educational workshops in schools, prisons and community centres. Rescue Me believes strongly that being aware of risk factors early can significantly reduce levels of crime and violence later in life. A team of professional social workers, Rescue Me has led ground-breaking research in Lebanese prisons with violent criminals and members of violent extremist groups, including ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra, Fatah al-Islam, and Al Quds Brigade, and their families. The work was conducted in Roumieh and Barabar el Khazen prisons, in the Hay el Gharbi neighbourhood of Beirut, and in the towns of Bar Elies and Majdal Anjar in Bekaa Governorate to better understand the underlying reasons for radicalization and design and deliver deradicalization and rehabilitation programming anchored in psychosocial therapy. Seventy inmates—61 men and 9 women—participated in this programme over a period of nine years. Rescue Me’s interventions combine psychosocial support, specifically art therapy and aggression replacement therapy (ART), to rehabilitate those who are radicalized and prepare them for reintegration into the community.

Context

Lebanon has long been subject to violent extremism by militant groups, but in 2007 attacks by Fatah al-Islam marked the presence of Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups in the country.²⁵³ Recent years have seen the rise of extremists affiliated with ISIS, with more than 900 Lebanese citizens travelling to Syria as foreign fighters.²⁵⁴ However, this number does not include Hezbollah fighters involved in Syria’s civil war, estimated to number between 7,000 and 9,000 as of 2015.²⁵⁵ Given Lebanon’s porous borders, it is difficult to get accurate figures, especially for returnees who are scared to reveal themselves for fear of going to prison. Among these returnees are certainly family members of fighters, but the numbers of associated women and children are unknown. They have performed diverse roles in the violence and conflict including supporting, recruiting, financing, and training fighters.

²⁵³ The Saban Center at the Brookings Institution (2007), Al-Qaeda’s Terrorist Threat to UNIFIL (available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20070608saab_ranstorp.pdf.)

²⁵⁴ According to The Soufan Group there were 900 there in 2015, more recent reports do not include numbers for Lebanon. See: The Soufan Group (2015), Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (available at: http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf)

The Soufan Group (2017), Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and Returnees (available at: <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>).

²⁵⁵ Counter-Extremism Project (2018), Lebanon: Extremism & Counter-Extremism (available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/lebanon/>.)

Lebanon is also home to two million Syrians fleeing war, adding to the existing 450,000 Palestinian refugees that already comprise 10 percent of Lebanon's population.²⁵⁶ The influx has strained society in ways that exacerbate vulnerability to the call of radical groups. Many displaced Syrians and children of unregistered marriages lack identity papers, making them de facto stateless people and preventing them from accessing education and employment. ISIL provided passports, money, and independence. "I have become a human being," one former fighter reportedly remarked in an interview.²⁵⁷

With everything else it is faced with, Lebanon is now at the front lines of tackling the complexity of returnees from ISIS and other violent extremist groups. Currently, there is no comprehensive strategy for dealing with returning violent extremists. Lebanon's 2017 National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism was drafted through a broad, whole-of-government process that failed to engage CSOs.²⁵⁸ The strategy identifies specific policies and activities related to the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners or returnees in at least four of its nine pillars: Pillar 1 on Dialogue and Conflict Prevention, Pillar 3 on Justice, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law, Pillar 5 on Gender Equality and Empowering Women, and Pillar 7 on Economic Development and Job Creation. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for implementing most of these recommendations, including taking over the prison administration from the Ministry of the Interior, with several specific mandates falling to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Public Health. None of the recommendations specifically address the rehabilitation and reintegration of women affiliated with violent extremist groups, though the strategy does advocate exploring the establishment of a rehabilitation centre for minor girls.

The Ministry of Defense leads existing efforts with a highly militarized approach focused on securing the border. Inmates in Roumieh Prison claim that sentencing depends on a returning fighter's sectarian affiliation, saying that most Sunni Muslim returnees—assumed to be affiliated with ISIS—go directly to prison, while Shia who have fought alongside Hezbollah and the Syrian Defense Forces are usually not detained or prosecuted. The returnees outside prison, who have managed to return and remain free, are usually smarter and more dangerous. There is little knowledge of or attention to this problem by Lebanese authorities, and NGOs are not permitted contact with these individuals.

Roumieh Prison has two specific blocks for Sunni and Salafist extremists that house 1,130 men. If someone is reported missing and then returns, and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) know indirectly that they have travelled to fight with ISIL, they can be detained on suspicion for five to six years, without a trial or conviction. In one case, a man detained for eight years was later proven innocent. The prison includes inmates with all levels of education and economic status, from workers, to educated professionals, to people with fancy cars. A prison staff of 30 oversees each block. Inmates often face years of incarceration without access to legal, psychosocial, or other support services. The men are held together for long periods of time without adequate programmes in place and with limited capacity for oversight. These conditions mean that even under state supervision, recruitment and radicalization continues in prisons.

Women extremist detainees are held in the general population of Barabar el Khazen Prison. Their sentences range between 1½ and 3 years, a relatively short time attributed to Lebanese cultural norms against women staying in prison for long. The group of 22 has now dwindled to 5, with most released and two traded to violent extremist groups in exchange for captured security personnel. It is not clear if there are more newly arrived women returnees; while prisoners sometimes share this information with Rescue Me, it is against the Lebanese constitution for an NGO to help. A small percentage of these women were directly involved as snipers or in mine action, while others provided logistical support for operations and financing, and acted as "draggers" to recruit others.

²⁵⁶ UNRWA (2018), "Where We Work: Lebanon" (available at: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/>).

²⁵⁷ Interview with Nancy Yammout, Rescue Me, 2018.

²⁵⁸ Presidency of the Council of Minister (2017), "National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism." Republic of Lebanon.

A larger cohort of women associated with violent extremist groups are relatives of the male prisoners living all around the country, including areas far from the prison such as Beqaa in the east and Saida in the south. This population is roughly 55 percent Syrians, 30 percent Palestinians, 5 percent other, and 10 percent Lebanese, with some family members still in Syria or living in IDP camps. Most women family members visit and maintain contact with their male relatives, providing emotional, financial, and other support, including pursuing their legal cases. Some women refuse communication or contact with their relatives who are prisoners. However, most visit weekly or every other week, bringing food, clothes and other necessities. With visitation only allowed thrice a week, this results in a crowded scene as thousands of families try to talk through 20 phones to prisoners on the other side of a glass barrier at the same time. Children sometimes visit but require special permission if they are under 12 years old; many inmates have not been able to hug their children for years.

The Ministry of Social Affairs does not support these families but connects them to NGOs to receive support in the form of food or mediation. Early marriage is on the rise among this population as they face increasing economic pressure. Prisoners are not allowed to receive any money; however, some continue to receive funds—likely from violent extremist groups—through their relatives, putting the whole family at risk. The government does not consider the role that the families of detained violent extremists may have played, nor the continued risk they may pose. While phones are widely surveilled, there is no other form of intervention by the state with the families.

OBJECTIVES	STAKEHOLDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improving crime prevention ■ Reducing risks of future crime and victimization by community awareness and education ■ Reducing the level of problem behaviours (e.g. antisocial behaviour, aggression, gang involvement) ■ Rehabilitation for prisoners and families inside and outside prison ■ Improving the justice system by drafting laws that will reduce crime rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ministry of Justice ■ Prison administration ■ Rescue Me ■ Internal Security Forces (ISF) ■ Interpol ■ Artichoke Studios (art therapist) ■ Global Steps (socioeconomic) ■ Ministry of Social Affairs (in process)

Strategy and Implementation

In 2011, Rescue Me approached Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces (ISF) to request permission to conduct research among inmates from violent extremist groups. Recognizing the value of a social work approach, the ISF granted permission on condition that Rescue Me shared its findings with the ministry. Once inside, the first inmate they met was a student of Osama Bin Laden. After one month of work, they obtained permission to interview other inmates from their “Emir”, a wealthy man nicknamed Abu al Waleed who was elected by the prisoners affiliated with Al Qaida as their representative.

Over a period of two years, Rescue Me built trust with those in prison who were fearful of information being shared with security actors like the police, and initially provided false information. The team—consisting of Nancy Yammout, a specialist in forensic social work, Maya Yammout, a profiler, and Yousra Itani, a mosaic artist trained by Rescue Me to provide art therapy—goes to the prison together every week except during holidays, Ramadan, or in the case of riots, which they usually know of in advance of the ISF. Their advisor and collaborator Dr. Raymond Hamden, a forensic clinical psychologist, visits a couple of times per year.



Nancy Yammout, Rescue Me, speaks during ICAN's annual women, peace and security forum

Since the inmates are Islamists and the team doesn't want to provoke them, they wear hijab and dress in calm colours. In addition, they conceal their sectarian identities and avoid religious discussions because that would shut down the conversation. Instead, they focus on a humanistic approach to develop trust, breaking the ice with simple questions such as, "How are you today?". "The first thing prisoners usually remark on is that we don't smell like cigarette smoke and coffee, as the guards do, and we don't talk to them about religion and politics," says Nancy Yammout.

Prisoners lower their guard in the short term while discussing politics, but this does not build trust that can be the foundation of a long-term relationship. By starting another way, by the sixth or seventh session they end up talking about their ideology without

noticing. With time, the inmates started to disclose information about their recruitment process. Many highlight their childhood and youth experiences as part of their pathway to violent extremism, stating that extremists filled the hole left in their lives by their absent fathers. They also explain where and how recruitment takes place, notably through family and friends, social media, and centres operating near mosques and gaining access to potential recruits through offers of religious education.

Rescue Me initiated engagement with male prisoners first and through them has explored the depths of gender dynamics in the violent extremist groups, particularly the diverse roles and responses of women as active participants, bystanders, and victims. Rescue Me groups prisoners into four categories—psychopathic, ethno-geographic political, ethno-geographic religious, and retributational—and tailors interventions accordingly to help initiate their deradicalization and rehabilitation.²⁵⁹ In many cases, individual assessments point to absentee parents or abusive parental figures as a key driving factor for many of those joining violent extremist groups. Rescue Me developed a treatment programme integrating art therapy, ART, Functional Family Therapy, and the House of Healing method.

After interviewing the 70 prisoners affiliated with violent extremism, Rescue Me shared what it learned in the media to foster public awareness of these issues. Before presenting the information on television, they informed the prisoners that they would talk about their cases and asked them what they would like them to say to society. They shared the prisoners' perspectives on their path to violent extremism and details of what they had and hadn't done. This information was incredibly valuable to people and was made possible due to the solid trust Rescue Me has built with these individuals.

Rescue Me also developed some of their stories into counter-messaging tools in two short videos, shared through a Facebook campaign. One focuses on the problems they had with their fathers, in which the men



Nancy and Maya Yammout at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences

²⁵⁹ Drawing on the works of: Dr. Raymond Hamden (2008), Psychology of Terrorists: 4 types (available at: <https://www.all-about-psychology.com/support-files/psychology-of-terrorists.pdf>).

spoke about the kind of relationships they wish they had had. The second illustrates their turning points by asking them what they would say if they had a chance to write a letter to their younger selves. The videos are subtitled in English.

Rescue Me works in communities with both victims and those associated with terrorism, as well as youth at risk. Their centre is located inside Beirut near Sabra and Shatila, in an area where youth are particularly vulnerable, near three mosques known to be recruitment sites. The neighbourhood is one that even the police do not enter. In addition to psychosocial support, they facilitate projects to address socioeconomic and structural issues that contribute to marginalization and create risk factors for radicalization. For example, to address the de facto statelessness of displaced Syrians without identity documents, Rescue Me helps them to get their Syrian passports. People are afraid to go back to Syria not only because of the war but also because the men may be forcibly conscripted. While a lengthy and difficult process, it is possible to obtain the documents through the Syrian embassy in Lebanon.

After release, these prisoners usually go through depression and struggle with the stigma of being labelled a terrorist by society. Rescue Me's psychosocial support programme addresses this issue through activities on labelling, and forgiveness of self and others. Currently, Maya Yammout gathers ex-prisoners for group therapy in a café, giving them sweets to produce endorphins and helping them not feel alone. This contact is permitted as long as they don't carry any letters to their family members still in prison, which is forbidden.

They have monitored some ex-prisoners closely after their release. One, who had been a boxer, had a very supportive family but no friends after his release. After three months, Rescue Me encouraged him to go back to the gym and talk to his trainer. He started boxing again and, fuelled by all the anger he had to work out, he won a championship. After six months he has one friend and says it's all he needs.

Progress and Results

- Rescue Me concludes that fractured family relationships are often the primary root cause of motivation to join violent extremist groups. In the absence of strong, loving parental figures, and in most cases a male role model, other actors can step in to promulgate a different ideology. Many of the prisoners were neglected and even subject to sexual abuse as children. They feel their mothers didn't defend them and while they may have been there physically, were not emotionally available. In many cases, they felt Rescue Me's team were the first women who had ever really listened to them.
- Rescue Me found ART an effective treatment because it addresses anger that functions to translate grievances into motivation to join ISIL.
- Among adolescents taking part in Rescue Me's community-based intervention, there was a statistically significant reduction in felony recidivism, improved social skills, and a reduction in problem behaviour.²⁶⁰
- Using a Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) the study found significantly lower scores of self-reported PTSD, depressive symptoms and psychosocial dysfunction than the comparison group.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ NIJ (2012), Program Profile: Aggression Replacement Training® (available at: <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=254>).

²⁶¹ Ibid.

- Family Functional Therapies are also helpful to promote family involvement and support. In Rescue Me’s family-based prevention and intervention programme for at-risk youth ages 11 to 18, the treatment group had lower recidivism rates, and when the programme was delivered by therapists who adhered carefully to the treatment model, the results were even more significant. The programme had a positive effect on youth by reducing risky behaviour, increasing strengths, and improving functioning across key life domains.²⁶²
- 223 men are registered for a new programme in Roumieh Prison pending funding.
- Eight women, the five remaining detainees and three of their best friends who are at risk, are registered for a new programme Rescue Me is developing specifically for women. The programme will address seven main themes:
 1. Defining Anger
 2. Becoming Aware of the Triggers
 3. My Anger vs. Others’ Anger
 4. Accepting Others
 5. Labelling
 6. Forgiveness
 7. Positive Reminder for The Future

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- ART was not useful for refugees between the ages of 8 and 14 from ISIL-controlled territories. Rescue Me believes ART didn’t work with this age group because the incredible suffering the children experienced meant that their anger and aggression could not be controlled. They had success using a Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), which aims to reduce children’s symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression caused by exposure to violence.
- ART is also not useful with psychopaths, because they cannot sit in a group for very long. One-to-one therapy is preferred in such cases.
- Rescue Me reports that some former prisoners contact them for support after being released.
- Rescue Me cannot discuss any of their research with those outside of the Ministry of Justice and ISF, as it could jeopardize their security.
- There are opportunities to engage women returnees to combat violent extremism by deterring others from joining such groups. The women want to talk, and with the proper intervention their experiences can be channelled into counter-narrative messages.

²⁶² Ibid.

- Staff debriefing is vital to protect their own well-being. Rescue Me supports their staff meeting with professional psychologists weekly for 1-2 hours. The prison team is supervised by a neuropsychologist, and a clinical psychologist is available to the rest of the team. The counselling helps them to cope with the cases they see.
- Due to political changes, funding from the US for the next phase of the prison-based rehabilitation programme for men has been held up. Rescue Me is not the only one—reportedly, 148 NGOs in Lebanon are at risk of closing for this reason. This has underlined the importance of a diverse pool of funders.
- Rescue Me needs a dedicated place to conduct its work with families of inmates and those who have been released. Meeting in a café is not sustainable as they should be able to inform the government of their location. The ex-prisoners cannot come to Rescue Me's centre in Beirut because it is far for many of them and it would not be good to expose them to the problems in that area. Rescue Me has found the ideal location where people can come from all over Lebanon, which it will secure pending sustainable funding.

Sustainability and Potential Application

Rescue Me's strategy and programming demonstrates a clear response to the need for tailored psychosocial rehabilitation programming that takes gender dynamics into consideration. Their work is a case of women peace practitioners effectively engaging both men and women violent extremist offenders in the prison context. Furthermore, the programme exemplifies how research can inform interventions for rehabilitation and reintegration in practice. Key ingredients of the programme's success, which can be applied to other contexts, include:

- Professional expertise in psychosocial approaches
- Context-specific knowledge of the issues and social dynamics
- Access to prisons and prisoners
- Ability and time to build trust with diverse stakeholders

Lebanon's National Strategy of Preventing Violent Extremism includes several provisions that if implemented would help sustain Rescue Me's programming and enable scaling it up. These include provisions for engaging civil society including social workers, addressing prison conditions, and supporting women's participation in efforts to prevent violent extremism.

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