

Preventing, reversing terrorist radicalization: New research initiative

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This will be the most comprehensive empirical look to date on preventing and reversing radicalization. Credit: University of Maryland/BSOS

A University of Maryland-led team of international experts will investigate ways to understand, prevent and reverse the radicalization of young people in destabilized areas of the world, and to keep them from embracing terror as a political tool.

The five year project - one of the most comprehensive empirical investigations to date on radicalization and deradicalization - is funded with a \$4.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Defense.

"Ultimately, we hope to identify tactics that will help inoculate young people against terrorist recruiters who urge the use of violence as a

legitimate political tool," says Principal Investigator Arie Kruglanski, a University of Maryland [social psychologist](#). "We need to understand with far greater precision the dynamics of radicalization, to be able to counter the forces of extremism."

Kruglanski argues that a critical value of the study is its focus on preventative rather than tactical counterterrorism, which he says costs far less in the long run.

Both he and the project's co-investigator, Michele Gelfand, are based in UMD's College of Behavioral and Social Sciences. Gelfand, a cross-cultural psychologist, conducts extensive research in the Middle East, and brings to the project insights from her own DoD-funded research on culture and negotiations.

Other team members come from the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (Paris), George Mason University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, University of Michigan, Northwestern University and the University of Warsaw.

Drawn from leading international experts in a variety of disciplines, the team will conduct intensive field interviews in parts of the Middle East; Maghreb, Africa; South Asia and South East Asia.

For example, the researchers will examine [radicalization](#) from a psychological perspective - as a quest for personal significance - while drawing on the insights of University of Michigan anthropologist Scott Atran: that observance of sacred values provides personal significance, while demanding individual sacrifice, Kruglanski explains.

The researchers will also examine efforts to deradicalize terrorists - a procedure used on terrorism detainees in an increasing number of vulnerable countries, but one that does not always last.

"There's a tug-of-war for their values," Kruglanski says. "Their willingness to use violence seems to remain in a state of flux, and the stakes could not be higher. Thousands of presumably deradicalized detainees have been released into their communities. But can they slide back into extremism? Behavioral science is well positioned to find out and assist with formation of a comprehensive detainee policy."

The study is funded through the Minerva Research Initiative, a Department of Defense program dedicated to long-term basic research in the social sciences. The Office of Naval Research will administer the grant.

"Developing an understanding of the social, behavioral and cultural conditions of conflict is vital to peace and security," says University of Maryland President Wallace Loh. "It is gratifying that the Department of Defense recognizes the significance of this research."

Dean of the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSOS), John Townshend, congratulated Kruglanski and Gelfand for their success in the highly competitive Minerva grant process. "I have no doubt they will make great strides toward better understanding the root causes behind the threat of global terrorism, an understanding which will have significant social benefits," Townshend says. "This is exactly the type of collaborative, multidisciplinary research that drives BSOS's innovative mission."

Provided by University of Maryland

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