



## Recent Danish Counterradicalization Initiatives: A Case Study on the Danish Security and Intelligence Service's Dialogue Forum

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### Introduction

This policy brief presents a short case study of a Danish initiative within the field of counterradicalization that provides channels for group interaction between state authorities and members of the Muslim community in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> What makes the initiative unusual and interesting is that the main government actor involved is the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, or PET).

PET's Dialogue Forum against militant extremism is essentially a regular series of meetings involving the terrorism prevention branch of the intelligence service and individuals from different parts of the Danish Muslim community. As such, it provides a mechanism for regular contact between two important stakeholder groups where discussion on issues relating to terrorism and extremism can take place. It is one element in a range of outreach and community engagement efforts being pursued by the Danish government to prevent extremist views and radicalization, particularly among young people.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, these were gathered together in a national action plan titled *A Common and Safe Future*.<sup>3</sup>

This policy brief has been prepared on behalf of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation as part of an ongoing series of briefs that gather, assess, and highlight examples of good practice within the field of counterradicalization. Other studies include

cases from the United Kingdom and Kenya.<sup>4</sup> This brief seeks to:

- a) Describe and assess the impact of PET's Dialogue Forum against violent extremism,
- b) Discuss successes and challenges of the Dialogue Forum and its community engagement efforts more broadly, and
- c) Conclude with some lessons learned.

Although the existence of the Dialogue Forum is public knowledge, its membership and the issues discussed within it are not made public, and there is limited open-source documentation available. Furthermore, certain stakeholders have participated in the research for this policy brief with the understanding of anonymity and are not identified below. Within these limitations, this policy brief is nonetheless able to point to a number of general lessons that are of interest and may have wider utility.

### Background

The Dialogue Forum needs to be understood as one element in a range of preventative measures relating to radicalization and extremism that have arisen in Denmark over the past decade. These seek to contribute to countering extremist views and rhetoric from a variety of sources, including from militant Islam. In order to understand why this is necessary in the Danish case, a number of

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institutional and contextual factors can be highlighted.

First, the global response to the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States orchestrated by, among others, the United Nations required member states to adopt more coordinated, cohesive, and targeted counterterrorism approaches. Since 2001, Denmark, alongside other countries, has tightened its antiterrorism legislation and adopted a range of preparedness and preventative measures stretching across government. PET contributes to these with capacity relating to all four counterterrorism response areas: pursuit, prevent, protect, and prepare. The Dialogue Forum, sits principally within the “prevent” area, whose main goal is to prevent people from turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes that can lead to radicalization and recruitment. This is also fully in line with the 2005 *European Union Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism*, which, inter alia, draws attention to ensuring that voices of mainstream opinion prevail over those of extremism.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the reaction among some parts of the Muslim community to the military engagement by Denmark and other nations in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as to the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad in 2005 by a Danish newspaper and their reprinting in 2008 has also been an important factor.<sup>6</sup> There have been a number of terrorism-related incidents, including the discovery of preparations for attacks, related particularly to the cartoonist and the newspaper that published them, and a number of arrests have taken place. Most of these incidents have occurred in Denmark, although in 2008, the Danish embassy in Islamabad was attacked. In its most recent publically available threat assessment, PET points to a “significant threat” against Denmark from networks,

groups, and individuals who adhere to a militant Islamist ideology. It notes that this threat is present within Denmark as well as abroad against Danish interests.<sup>7</sup>

Third, research suggests that public attitudes and the media and political discourse toward minorities and immigration to Denmark have deteriorated over the last 20 years. Despite finding a wide range of areas where social and professional interaction occurs between people of different ethnic backgrounds, a 2010 survey conducted by the Open Society Foundations also found that Muslims are more marginalized than other groups in Denmark despite efforts to strengthen integration. It found that negative attitudes toward the police persist among some ethnic minority communities, including Muslims. There are indications that ethnic profiling has been a cause of tension, most notably in relation to stop-and-search operations involving young men.<sup>8</sup> This is reported to have been a contributing factor to the outbreaks of rioting that took place in February 2008 in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen.<sup>9</sup> According to PET and members of the Muslim community in Copenhagen who have been consulted, the Dialogue Forum can contribute to defusing the tensions that can lead to such events.

### “A Common and Safe Future”

In an effort to gather the initiatives being taken at national and municipal levels against violent extremism, in 2009 the Danish government published a national action plan titled *A Common and Safe Future*. The plan’s twin objectives are to ensure that society is able to identify and address specific problems relating to extremism and to maintain and further develop Denmark as a democratic society with freedom, responsibility, equality, and opportunity for all. Within this, 22 specific initiatives involving a range of state and municipal authorities, institutions, and

associations, including the intelligence service, are outlined within seven focus areas.

1. *Direct contact with youth.* This includes preventative talks and mentoring schemes, as well as more tailored inputs for individuals identified as being in the early stages of radicalization. There is also a wide range of preventative approaches, including awareness raising and capacity building where counterradicalization efforts are incorporated into local crime prevention. This responds to the observation from actors on the ground that they need more knowledge and tools to understand and interact with youth showing signs of radicalization.<sup>10</sup>

2. *Inclusion based on rights and obligations.* This includes strengthening, for example, parental responsibility on the one hand and antidiscrimination on the other, including access to justice and to vocational training

3. *Dialogue and information.* Including efforts to embrace unity and diversity (for example through role models), this improves information about the objectives and results of Danish foreign policy and efforts to stimulate a more nuanced understanding of geopolitical and social issues. PET's Dialogue Forum fits here

4. *Democratic cohesion.* This includes various steps to enhance understanding of democracy and civil citizenship in the school system, through social and sports associations, and so on.

5. *Efforts in vulnerable residential areas.* This includes, for example, preventing the development of parallel societies and ghettos through residents associations and leisure opportunities.

6. *Special initiatives in prisons.* This includes

specialized training for prison staff and initiatives directed toward prison inmates.

7. *Knowledge, cooperation, and partnerships.* This includes a more "joined up" approach from government authorities, improved knowledge management, improved international cooperation, research and mapping, and enhanced communication methods to counter misinformation and propaganda.

The action plan is coordinated by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration through its Division for Cohesion and Prevention of Radicalization. PET, through its Centre for Prevention, also plays a key role.<sup>11</sup>

### PET's Dialogue Forum

The Dialogue Forum against militant extremism is a series of group meetings involving members of PET's Centre for Prevention and community leaders from different parts of the Muslim community in Denmark. It has met regularly since 2008 and aims to:

- Provide a regular forum where members of the intelligence service and the Muslim community in Denmark, particularly imams, teachers, and other public figures, can meet to discuss issues relating to radicalization and extremism;
- Promote a better understanding among the Muslim community of the intelligence service's role in countering radicalization and preventing terrorism;
- Draw from participants' knowledge of their communities to strengthen preventative initiatives that depend on a good understanding of the context; and
- Offer opportunities to challenge narratives through evidence-based discussion

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involving external experts and members of the Muslim community.<sup>12</sup>

Dialogue Forum meetings normally take place twice a year in two groups, one in the east of the country and one in the west. Meetings typically involve 20–30 people. They are convened and facilitated by PET, who also invite guest speakers and organize the agenda, although this is also open to suggestions from members. PET is normally represented at meetings by one or two staff members from its Centre for Prevention.

Participants are invited directly by PET as individuals and not as representatives. They are selected on the basis of the “insight and influence” that they have within their communities. The only redline is that there must be a rejection of violence and an acceptance of the need to prevent it as well as of the value of maintaining dialogue. Members of militant groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, have not been invited.<sup>13</sup> The Dialogue Forum members consulted for this study indicated agreement with this decision on the basis that such groups are already radicalized and their inclusion would not permit an open discussion.

Within these conditions, Dialogue Forum members include a range of public figures including religious leaders, teachers, and community workers, among whom are also a number of women. There appear to be relatively few young members (under age 35) and none who could be described as “youth.”

Participation in the Dialogue Forum can be perceived as controversial and expose members to criticism from others within their communities, even though there may be widespread support for the overall goal. The members interviewed reported that they had been fairly open about their attendance. In one of the cases, this had met with some suspicion, but it also provided an opportunity to explain

and defend the decision to participate, which, from a prevention perspective, was positive.

Thus, members may tread a fine line between their commitment to engagement with the intelligence service and the position they hold within their communities, where there is likely to be a multiplicity of views and influences. In the case of the people consulted for this study, they personally saw no contradiction in their role as community leaders and citizens with an overriding interest in prevention. Indeed, they presented it in terms of a civic duty. A contributing factor to this is likely to be the generally positive image of PET held by members of the Muslim community in Denmark.<sup>14</sup>

Whether the absence of youth is a limitation, given that youth is a target group, needs to be considered. It may not be a limitation, provided that existing members have good levels of access to them. Sources consulted emphasized the importance of a varied membership so that a palette of different views is represented. Generally, members are active within their communities, so discussions can have a spreading effect within members’ networks, communities, schools, and other bodies.

### Promoting Understanding of PET’s Prevention Role

PET also runs a number of initiatives that supplement the organization’s traditional intelligence activities with a broader preventative approach to extremism and terrorism. These include support to other state and local authorities, for example, through awareness raising and capacity building within schools, social services, and police as well as within the prison service, and various forms of outreach, including direct engagement with community leaders as well as individuals at risk, awareness raising, advice, and

networking.<sup>15</sup> PET has made an effort to participate in public meetings and events in areas with large immigrant populations so that it can explain its work. These initiatives have helped bring the organization into the public domain.

Dialogue Forum members that were consulted for this study took a positive view of PET's prevention role. The meetings serve to break down barriers that might otherwise exist between them. They saw the Dialogue Forum as a positive initiative in which they have an interest in participating because it offers the possibility for informing the intelligence service about the issues and concerns among their communities.

The value of the Dialogue Forum thus derives from and complements the willingness of community leaders to promote prevention within their communities by providing a semiformal mechanism whereby members of the intelligence service can meet regularly with them. It acts as a supplement and not a replacement for other initiatives, and if the arrangement stopped, the other channels of communication would continue. Dialogue Forum members consulted draw attention to the fact that PET is seen as sensitive to their position and role within their communities. This is demonstrated by PET's practice of informing community leaders about operations, such as arrests, where these directly concern members of their communities.<sup>16</sup> This does not take place through the Dialogue Forum but is done quietly and bilaterally.

### Challenging Narratives

An important aim for PET is to open up discussion on viewpoints and stories that are used in or underpin extremist rhetoric and ideology. The focus is on prevention and on addressing vulnerabilities rather than on apportioning blame or guilt relating to

incidents that may have occurred.<sup>17</sup> It was mentioned that the Dialogue Forum has been used to contribute to countering rumors (e.g., of Koran burnings) and to develop a more nuanced and balanced coverage of immigration, integration, minority issues, and terrorism in the media. Both PET and the members consulted placed value on extending discussions to include international issues in relation to explaining, for example, Danish foreign and development policy, issues raised by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring. This seems important given the strong links that many members of the Muslim community have with other parts of the world. An example was given of a presentation to the Dialogue Forum by a staff member of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that provided details of Danish aid to the Middle East and North Africa region. This was reportedly an eye-opener for some members the Dialogue Forum who were not previously aware of the extent of Danish support.

The actual impact of these countermessages on prevention is unclear and needs further study. Logically, however, for communities to play a role in identifying and protecting individuals from radicalization, their members need to have capacity to spot them and challenge their views. In this respect, the Dialogue Forum is likely to have a positive influence to the extent that its participants' capacity to identify people at risk is increased and their counterarguments enriched. This is likely to result in exposure to sources of informed opinion that can just as well belong to other members of the Dialogue Forum as to PET or the experts invited to make presentations.

The interviews indicated that Dialogue Forum members place considerable value on the lateral interaction between themselves and other members, a point that reflects the diverse nature of the Muslim community and the wide range of experience and views held. They

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noted that the discussions in the Forum have been challenging and difficult in some cases, which is perhaps not surprising when dealing with issues on which strong views are held. Nevertheless, the lateral dialogue (between participants) is valuable. This finding confirms the experiences from elsewhere that countermessages can be more successful when coming from communities themselves, i.e., peer groups, than from governments.<sup>18</sup>

### Results and Lessons Learned

The fact that the Dialogue Forum continues to function after several years is an indicator that participants find it of value. It is an indicator of the Dialogue Forum's success that it has succeeded in retaining the trust and cooperation necessary to engage with a significant number of community leaders on a regular basis. One reason for this is likely to be the competent and soft approach taken by the intelligence staff members involved, which has emphasized the dialogue and engagement aspects of prevention and underplayed other roles. Another is that contacts through the Dialogue Forum have been complemented through subsequent bilateral contacts where members have been consulted in relation to police actions. Thus, members feel that there is a mutual benefit and interest.

All the interviews contributing to this report highlighted that discussions in the forum provide a mechanism for "challenging narratives" by encouraging a more nuanced and informed exchange of views and information on issues that underpin extremist views and ideology and that can contribute to radicalization. There appear to be several factors contributing to this.

- The quality of participants is important. They need to be representative of their communities, including men and women, and they need to be able to draw on trust and cooperation within their communities

so that there can be a spreading effect from the dialogue discussions. Their connections need to include people at risk whose views and concerns can inform the dialogue and, in turn, be influenced by it.

- Participants need to be committed to the principles of dialogue and prepared to discuss openly issues on which they may have strong feelings. They need to be prepared to enter into a dialogue within their own communities, in particular with people at risk.
- The group nature of the arrangement adds opportunities for lateral interaction and peer influence across different segments of the Muslim community represented by participants.
- The convener role needs to be carefully balanced and coherent. A traditional security approach to interaction with the Muslim community would confirm some peoples' suspicions that the Dialogue Forum is primarily about intelligence gathering. PET has needed to recognize that there are sensitivities within the Muslim community about working with the regular police and the intelligence service.
- Discussion themes need to be relevant and have substance. Participatory techniques, including case studies and group work, are needed to encourage interaction. External presenters can add a dynamic that can enrich the discussion by enhancing the evidence base.
- By engaging with community leaders on a prevention agenda and restricting membership to people who openly reject violence, the Dialogue Forum remains on relatively safe ideological ground. The inclusion of representatives from militant

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groups, which are already radicalized, would be politically difficult and counterproductive as it would not permit an open discussion.

- The off-the-record format appears to be an important factor. Dialogue Forum meetings and its membership are not publicized, although the existence of the Forum is in the public domain. The reason for this lack of transparency is partly to ensure an open discussion and avoid the risk that the Forum becomes a political platform and partly to respect the sensitivities of its participants, whose communities include people opposed to cooperation with the police and intelligence service.

## Conclusion

PET's Dialogue Forum appears to be a worthwhile contribution to the wider palette of counterradicalization and terrorism prevention being pursued by the Danish government. To be clearer about its results and impact, a more in-depth analysis is required that consults more widely among stakeholders. Nonetheless, findings arising from the current study indicate several things.

- The willingness of the intelligence service to devote time and resources to hosting

meetings and their interest in developing a nonoperational preventative dialogue on a group basis are positively received and useful.

- Equally relevant is the willingness of members of the Muslim community to actively participate and be seen to participate. The Dialogue Forum serves as a common ground for the mutual interest in prevention.
- Selection of participants is crucial. They need to be well connected, have the respect of their communities, and access to people at risk.
- The lateral dialogue between participants is uniquely offered by the group format of the Dialogue Forum. It provides opportunities for positive messaging between peers that can supplement the input from experts and other sources.
- Participants provide access to viewpoints at grassroots level and possibilities to extend the “prevent” agenda to people at risk. Through these connections, PET is able to extend its “prevent” agenda. Without the Dialogue Forum, the relationship would be more of an opportunistic character.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The policy brief has been produced in consultation with PET and a small number of other parties, including members of the Dialogue Forum. Any mistakes or inaccuracies, however, are the responsibility of the author, and the views presented in this brief do not necessarily represent the views of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this policy brief, the term “counterradicalization” is understood as the preventative efforts linked to halting the process whereby a person gradually accepts the ideas and methods of extremism. The term “deradicalization” refers to efforts to help persons leave extremist circles or disassociate themselves from extremism.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Denmark, *A Common and Safe Future: An Action Plan to Prevent Extremist Views and Radicalization Among Young People*, January 2009, [http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/58D048E7-0482-4AE8-99EB-928753EFC1F8/0/a\\_common\\_and\\_safe\\_future\\_danish\\_action\\_plan\\_to\\_prevent\\_extremism.pdf](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/58D048E7-0482-4AE8-99EB-928753EFC1F8/0/a_common_and_safe_future_danish_action_plan_to_prevent_extremism.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> This piece is part of series of policy briefs commissioned by the Center to examine community outreach and awareness efforts related to prevention of terrorism. Other briefs have focused on the UK's Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers (STREET) and on countering violent extremism among Kenyan Muslim youth. For information, see [http://globalct.org/resources\\_publications.php](http://globalct.org/resources_publications.php).

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union, European Union Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, 24 November 2005, paras. 10–11, <http://register.consilium.eu.int/pdf/en/05/st14/st14781-re01.en05.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Harrison, "Danish Muslims in Cartoon Protest," BBC News, 15 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7247817.stm>.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Terror Analysis, Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), Assessment of the Terror Threat Against Denmark, 23 November 2010, [http://www.pet.dk/upload/vtd\\_-\\_ukl\\_-\\_engelsk\\_-\\_nov2010.pdf](http://www.pet.dk/upload/vtd_-_ukl_-_engelsk_-_nov2010.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Open Society Foundations, Muslims in Copenhagen, March 2011, p. 180,

[http://www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles\\_publications/publications/muslims-copenhagen-20110303/a-muslims-copenhagen-en-20110428.pdf](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/muslims-copenhagen-20110303/a-muslims-copenhagen-en-20110428.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> "Danish Arrests After Youth Riots," BBC News, 18 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7251178.stm>.

<sup>10</sup> Danish Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, The Challenge of Extremism: Examples of Deradicalisation and Disengagement Programmes in the EU, October 2010, [http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/20FBDF6E-43C2-43F1-A770-D908D67AC16C/0/the\\_challenge\\_of\\_extremisme\\_final.pdf](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/20FBDF6E-43C2-43F1-A770-D908D67AC16C/0/the_challenge_of_extremisme_final.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> In June 2011, an externally conducted midterm evaluation of the action plan concluded that good results were being achieved, especially in relation to knowledge sharing and capacity building. The multidisciplinary coordination and cooperation structures established were also highlighted as important instruments contributing to effectiveness. Danish Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, Mid-Term Evaluation of the Action Plan "A Common and Safe Future," June 2011, [http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/B1A688EE-5940-413B-B5F8-4884AEF8AD0F/0/midtvejsevalueringen\\_en\\_faelles\\_tryg\\_fremtid\\_resume\\_engelsk.pdf](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/B1A688EE-5940-413B-B5F8-4884AEF8AD0F/0/midtvejsevalueringen_en_faelles_tryg_fremtid_resume_engelsk.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> PET officials, interview with author, 26 October 2011. See PET, Report 2008–2010, n.d., [http://www.pet.dk/upload/pet\\_report\\_2008-2010\\_uk.pdf](http://www.pet.dk/upload/pet_report_2008-2010_uk.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> PET officials, interview with author, 26 October 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Open Society Foundations, Muslims in Copenhagen.

<sup>15</sup> PET, Unge på afvej: Forebyggelse af ekstremisme og radikalisering, n.d., <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/C43014FE-8A28-4F0D-B654-25E5A306979D/0/Ungep%C3%A5afvejeA4final.pdf> (in Danish).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> PET officials, interview with author, 26 October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> European Policy Planners' Network on Countering Radicalisation and Polarisation, The Role of Civil Society in Counter Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, October 2010, [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/PPN%20Paper%20-%20Community%20Engagement\\_FORWEBSITE.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/PPN%20Paper%20-%20Community%20Engagement_FORWEBSITE.pdf).