Mohammed Hassan Khalid was 15 years old when he was arrested and charged with terrorism. At the time he lived in Howard County, Maryland, with his family. He had been accepted to Johns Hopkins University, and even offered a scholarship. But in the summer of 2011, federal agents arrived at Khalid’s home and took him away to a juvenile correctional facility.

He was later convicted of conspiring with Colleen LaRose (aka “Jihad Jane”) to murder a Swedish artist. Agents had previously visited Khalid to warn him about his activities on the dark web—translating and editing jihadist videos. But Khalid ignored the cautions and eventually found himself wearing a jumpsuit.

Today, Khalid reflects that “I needed the hard reality of prison to come to terms with my past.” He also needed charitable help that allowed him to return to society “as a stronger and better person.” In a narrative he wrote describing his descent into extremism and then his path back out, he admits “I was resistant to change. The world of religious extremism was the only world that I had ever known.” It was a private nonprofit called Quilliam that helped him chart a new life course.

“Since I first discovered Quilliam from behind bars, I have wholeheartedly embraced the organization’s unique approach in dealing with extremisms of all forms,” he writes. “It is my hope that lessons from my past can be used to help mitigate the disastrous effects of extremes."

When extremists leave prison, who helps them find a new life?

By Ashley May
and came to the conclusion that Islamism was the path to safety. He built up Hizb ut-Tahrir at university in London, and then in Pakistan. He moved to Egypt with his wife and child with plans to build a cell.

It was not long before the Egyptian police arrested Nawaz and imprisoned him in Mazrah Tora, the country’s notorious prison for jihadists and political opponents. As a British citizen, Nawaz’s incarceration was international news and legally complex. After five years, Amnesty International and the British government were able to secure his release. His return to England brought uncomfortable questions: did Nawaz’s time in prison make him more extreme, or less? Was he going to lead the U.K. branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir? And if so, where would he take the group?

What Nawaz did next was a surprise. He publicly resigned from Hizb ut-Tahrir after 12 years of Islamism. Gone was his radical fervor—to the point where he was willing to give up everything in order to take a different path.

“When I left H.T., I also left my friends behind. My life had been so entwined with the organization that my entire social circle had gone with it. I didn’t have a job or any money.”

This all-encompassing decision even involved leaving his wife, who remained a member of the group. Nawaz ended up living in his car.

One of Nawaz’s friends could relate to his predicament. Ed Husain, who had also left extremism behind, was working on a Ph.D. and writing his first book, The Islamist: Why I Became an Islamic Fundamentalist, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left. Husain started meeting with Nawaz in his car to talk about Islam and the West, individual liberty, and human rights. They started to dream about using the recruitment and organization skills they honed in Islamism for the sake of Western liberalism.

What finally emerged in 2007 was what Husein and Nawaz would call the “world’s first counter-extremism organization”—a think tank named after William Quilliam, the Englishman who opened Britain’s first mosque.

A new course
Maajid Nawaz is a “former.” At one time he was an Islamist. He advocated for a Caliphate that would unite Muslims around the world into one aggressive, politicized entity.

Nawaz grew up in Britain in a Pakistani immigrant family, surrounded by gangs, bullying, racism, and violence. At the age of 17 he joined an Islamist organization called Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). At the time it seemed like protection, he explains in his book Radical. “When you’re that age, already angry and disenfranchised, you’re very susceptible to absolutes.” He saw graphic videos of Muslims slaughtered in Bosnia and came to the conclusion that Islamism was the path to safety. He built up Hizb ut-Tahrir at university in London, and then in Pakistan. He moved to Egypt with his wife and child with plans to build a cell.

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Ashley May is managing editor of Philanthropy.
Radical from 2009 to 2015 (the Stuart Family Foundation totaling about a million and a half dollars to Nawaz, leading to a series of grants that “comes with the territory.”

Impressed, Anderson introduced his board in the early years of Quilliam’s formation. Nawaz started to engage in public debates over Islam. He had not left the Muslim religion; just Islamist extremism, distinguishing him from activists who had left the faith, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Quilliam commissioned imams to theologically probe the relationship between Islam and liberalism, whilst engaging analysts to track the Islamist landscape in real time. All the while, the group of “formers” who joined its network continued to grow.

Lorenzo Vidino, who runs the Project on Extremism at George Washington University says that Quilliam was one of his models when he set up his study center in 2015. The nuanced analysis and former-radical leadership of Nawaz’s group, Vidino says, has had a “terrific impact” on the British public conversation, challenging assumptions of both the Left and the Right on this topic. The trailblazing organization has acquired “lots of enemies” in the process, he notes, but that “comes with the territory.”

Truman Anderson of the Stuart Family Foundation encountered Nawaz in the early years of Quilliam’s formation. Impressed, Anderson introduced his board to Nawaz, leading to a series of grants totaling about a million and a half dollars from 2009 to 2015 (the Stuart Family Foundation is in the process of sunsetting this year). Anderson says that Quilliam’s research on radicalization—and especially how to interrupt it—is widely cited and used by other programs.

Using the experiences of former Islamists to battle extremism is at the center of Quilliam’s growing efforts in the U.S. Starting in 2018, the organization created a North American offspring led by Muhammad Fraser-Rahim. Fraser-Rahim isn’t a former Islamist. He is a black Muslim from Charleston, South Carolina, who worked as a counterterrorism analyst for U.S. intelligence services, including writing Daily Briefs for the U.S. President. His Ph.D. examined African-American Islam, and its connection to the broader Islamic world.

Fraser-Rahim’s aims for Quilliam in the U.S. are very practical. Interrupt the radicalization process. Reintegrate past offenders into healthy community life. Challenge the assumption that nothing can be done other than security. “Since my time in government I’ve dedicated my life to engaging with individuals on their journey out of extremism.” Mohammed Khalid, whose story opened this article, is one of Fraser-Rahim’s successes.

Right now Fraser-Rahim has about a dozen “cases” he meets with frequently to talk about their beliefs and daily lives. Some individuals he meets with in prison. Some have been released. He uses a methodical deradicalization process that can be effective with many people.

Fraser-Rahim’s phone buzzes often. A justice official is preparing for the release of an inmate in a rural area, and wants him to keep an eye out. A first-person narrative written by a former extremist is being approved by Homeland Security as part of a rehabilitation. Tribal chiefs in Africa are asking about the possibility of a workshop on violent extremism for their community. A news outlet needs a source to comment on current events. A book publisher needs line edits.

Violent extremism can be countered, Fraser-Rahim asserts, but it requires myriad kinds of work. Research on groups, and on psychological processes. Media messaging. Lots of counseling on the ground.

The road to transformation is a little like beating an addiction. Stepping away from extremism is a “messy process.” It’s not simple. It is not always linear. But it’s possible. And it has to be done.

Filling a niche

Quilliam’s U.S. effort is small. Very small. Fraser-Rahim has two full-time employees and five consultants on his team and manages a $1.5 million budget. “We keep things lean,” he says. “Obviously we could use some assistance.”

Part of Quilliam’s austerity has to do with fallout in the public eye. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center put Quilliam on one of its notorious “hate lists.” This precipitated a massive fall in donations. Quilliam took the SPLC to court in Britain, resulting in a $3.4 million settlement.

But the impact from SPLC’s slander lingers. Google “Quilliam” and out-of-date or spurious stories recycling the attack will pop up. On the “About” section of its website, Quilliam has a whole section titled “Setting the Record Straight,” responding to false allegations that the group smears ordinary Muslim organizations, receives heavy government funding, or gives respectability to extremists. This is likely to drag on the charity’s fundraising for some time to come.

Other groups that follow and counter extremism in the U.S. are also comparatively small. Vidino’s project at George Washington University has 11 staff members and what he calls the “coffee budget” of one of the larger think tanks. Yet his organization has become a primary domestic-extremism researcher for the New York Times, and works steadily on the
operate independently, they need donors. “Middle East experts” are a dime a dozen, but the number of scholars expert in extremism in the U.S. is tiny, and many of them are at independent organizations supported by philanthropy.

Cameron Munter was U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan from 2010 to 2012, Ambassador to Serbia before then, and has held many other senior diplomatic posts in and around Muslim countries. He first learned about Nawaz while he was still ambassador in Pakistan, and since his retirement from government he has been involved with Quilliam in numerous ways, especially when he took over the reins of the East-West Institute.

Quilliam “is doing something a lot of people talk about but few know how to do, which is to see the counterterrorist problem from the point of view of people living through it,” he tells me. “They really do seem to get results.” Today, says Munter, “diplomacy is not just diplomats.” Much international education is done by private universities. International corporations play a role in defining attitudes and culture. Nonprofits are important.

“The government is necessary, but not sufficient,” he says. For diplomatic successes, multiple entities within a society need to work toward common goals. “The government has this habit of saying, ‘We should do it.’ The rest of you get out of the way.” But a wise government person, a wise ambassador, will realize, ‘These guys have talents that the U.S. government doesn’t have. These guys have access. These guys have experience.”

In the difficult, delicate work of “preventing violent extremism, figuring out a way to get young people not to join these jihadi groups, it’s wise for the U.S. government to recognize, ‘You can achieve things we can’t.”

Charities like Quilliam have a unique role, Munter notes. Their independence gives them credibility—especially within faith and immigrant communities—that government programs don’t have. And to operate independently, they need donors.

Difficult and dire

“How do you know it’s going to work?” That is a question Nick Rasmussen hears a lot, often from Members of Congress. Like Munter, Rasmussen spent most of his working life in government, most recently as director of the National Counterterrorism Center. When he left the public sector and went to work at the McCain Institute in 2017, he was inspired by a vision to address “gaps” in national security that government can’t fill. As part of that, he now leads a small team at McCain zeroed in on preventing extremist violence in the United States.

Working in this area requires a “tolerance for messiness,” Rasmussen warns. It’s very difficult to measure the impact of prevention programs, for instance. “When you stop something from happening, how do you document a success?” he asks.

Michael Davidson is very familiar with that problem. He leads GenNext, a community of young philanthropists who aspire to be “citizen leaders.” He’s observed that many donors are nervous about straying from well-beaten paths. “You hear a lot of ‘I want proven models I can scale up.’ Or ‘I want to measure the impact immediately.’ That means a lot of problems will never get taken on.” A branch of philanthropy like national security can be stultified in this way. “If you help Maajid Nawaz you’re not going to be able to say with any finality that you stopped X terrorist attacks. You can’t think of it that way,” he warns.

Truman Anderson reports that even after his board decided to focus on extremism, it took two years to place its first grant. There was a period of vetting, of exploring the field, of finding the pitfalls. With few private funders out there to learn from, they had to do their own exploring.

Davidson suggests potential funders of anti-extremism education and other national-security causes “abdicating responsibility because they think it’s the domain of government.” Yet many government officials are hungry for help from private groups who might provide new angles, new competencies, new energy. GenNext got involved in national-security philanthropy after law-enforcement officials told them, in Davidson’s summation, that today’s terror problem “will not be solved unless the private sector is playing a role, just because of the nature of the threat.”

After ten years as a funder, Davidson is even more convinced. “Government is not wired to fight recruitment into radical organizations. It doesn’t have the credibility, it doesn’t have the skills, that’s not government’s domain.”

News headlines illustrate the seriousness of this challenge. In November 2019, a 28-year-old Briton released earlier in the year from imprisonment for terror activity started knife-killing shoppers, killing two before police shot him dead. Perversely, he was in London to attend a conference on deradicalization of Islamists, after having convinced the authorities who paroled him that he had recanted his extremist views. Another very similar attack was carried out in London this February by an Islamist just out of prison. “Officials,” reported the Wall Street Journal, “have acknowledged the growing security challenge stretched counterterrorism services face from people convicted of terror offenses returning into the community after serving their sentences, a parallel test to one posed by jihadists returning from Middle East war zones.”

“There are a lot of people locked up on terrorism charges, in the U.S. and in Europe, who are about to leave prison,” Anderson tells me. “They are going to be a problem. Local governments are unschooled in how to contend with them.”

“The country needs to know that good things can be done in this area, with high leverage, if public-spirited people will put money into the effort,” Michael Davidson argues. He implores his fellow donors not to overlook the potential of national-security philanthropy. I check the light on my tape recorder, and keep taking notes.