

Al Shifa Home: A Model for the Rehabilitation of ISIS Combatants

Bulama Bukarti^{a1}, Caleb Tukahiirwa^b, David Ocitti^c, Nasiifu Kizito^d, Noah Tumwebaze^c, Peace Kyasiimire^f, Ryan O'Farrell^g

^aVice President of DDR & Deradicalization, Bridgeway Foundation, ^bClinical Psychologist, Al Shifa Home (ASH), ^cLivelihood Officer, Al Shifa Home (ASH), ^dDeradicalization Lead & Imam, Al Shifa Home (ASH), ^eCenter Manager, Al Shifa Home (ASH), ^fCounseling Psychologist, Al Shifa Home (ASH), ^gDefections Operations Coordinator, Bridgeway Foundation

Abstract

Managing former violent extremists, especially jihadist-affiliated offenders, remains a global challenge. Indefinite detention is unsustainable, yet release without intervention carries serious risks. This paper presents practitioner-based insights from Al Shifa Home (ASH), East Africa's first private deradicalization center, offering a promising model for disengagement and reintegration. Since May 2023, ASH has supported 194 former Islamic State combatants through a 12-week residential program combining psychosocial care, ideological rehabilitation, and livelihood training. Early results show 90% mental health improvement, 75% reduction in violent intent, and only two recidivism attempts. Post-program, all participants pursued education or employment, with 33% countering extremist influence. ASH's model draws on local cultural frameworks, strategic disengagement methods, and Koehler's "re-pluralization" theory. This paper explores its theory of change, operations, and early outcomes, arguing for holistic rehabilitation that blends psychological, ideological, and socio-economic support. ASH offers valuable lessons for effective, humane extremist disengagement in conflict-affected regions.

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Introduction

For the past twenty or so years, experts, policymakers, and stakeholders across various regions and contexts have intensely debated the best ways to handle former violent extremist offenders from jihadist groups (Koehler, 2017). While there is broad agreement that these individuals should not be left to languish indefinitely in detention, there is also consensus that releasing them into the community without proper intervention is not a viable option.

¹ Corresponding Author Contact: Bulama Bukarti, Email: bbukarti@Bridgewayfoundation.org, 20 Greenway Plaza, Suite 450, Houston, TX 77046

Similarly, there is a broad consensus among analysts and practitioners that defeating jihadism requires more than security measures—it also demands preventing radicalization and rehabilitating those already radicalized (Rabasa *et al.*, 2010).

There are many reasons to create robust and effective rehabilitation programs. Economically, rehabilitation is far more cost-effective than long-term incarceration. Rehabilitation addresses not only the risks of recidivism and re-engagement in insurgent or criminal activity for former violent extremists, but also the psychological trauma and distress they may continue to suffer, which can have lasting effects on them and on their families and communities if left untreated (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019). By helping individuals reintegrate, families reconcile, and communities heal (Bukarti, 2019), deradicalization and rehabilitation programs can address the social isolation and stigmatization that often drive individuals back toward extremism, and in preventing former violent extremists from rejoining terrorist groups, weaken such organizations over time.

Rehabilitating jihadist offenders requires a rigorous, comprehensive approach that not only addresses the ideological, psychological, and socio-economic drivers of violent extremism but also directly counters the affective, pragmatic, and ideological ties to extremist groups (Rabasa *et al.*, 2010, p. 42). In this paper, we highlight the approach of Al Shifa Home (ASH) to the deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) fighters. ASH aims to transform former fighters into peaceful, productive citizens by providing trauma counseling, ideological disengagement, vocational training, and family reintegration initiatives. It focuses on the individual client and on the broader social ecosystem, disrupting the cycle of violence and emphasizing the human capacity for change through compassion, opportunity, and support.

Between May 2023, when its first cohort was enrolled, and November 2024, ASH has graduated and reintegrated 194 former ISCAP members and provided ongoing monitoring and support. ASH also supported an additional 23 clients outside the center, but this paper examines the 194 clients, including minors, who completed the full ASH program. We present the theory of change and objectives behind ASH's approach; detail ASH's structure, staffing, and operations; and outline the program's initial results. We also highlight the key challenges faced by the program and offer insights that could benefit policy makers, practitioners, and researchers.

The results from ASH's first years of operation are promising. Among the program's 194 graduates, only two cases of attempted recidivism were recorded. Ninety percent of clients reported a reduction in PTSD symptoms, 82% showed a decrease in stress levels, and 75% demonstrated a significant reduction in their willingness to engage in violence for a religious cause. Ninety-eight percent of graduates had either learned a new skill or improved an existing one, and 90% had developed a livelihood plan. Seventy individuals returned to school, 86 enrolled in vocational training (60 of whom have now graduated), and 40 have started small businesses. Notably, 33% of graduates chose to contribute to efforts to combat ISCAP by cooperating with government authorities or participating in Bridgeway Foundation's defection messaging campaign.

Drawing on these successes, we argue that effective deradicalization and rehabilitation must rest on three pillars: mental health and psychosocial support that addresses symptoms of trauma and grief and restores trust, self-worth, and mental well-being; ideological engagement that weakens ideological justifications for violence and promotes behavioral change; and livelihood development that offers viable economic alternatives through skills training and financial assistance. Like the three-stone cooking pot common in African communities, all three stones are essential—remove one, and the system risks collapse. The ASH program models how these three essential aspects of rehabilitation can work in collaboration to benefit individuals and communities. When we equip former fighters with the tools to rebuild their lives and actively counter the menace of extremism, we advance the broader global effort to curb violence.

Methodological Framework and Data Sources

This paper is authored by practitioners and program managers directly engaged in the design, implementation, and daily operations of ASH, written as a practice-based insight report rather than a scholarly research study. Its primary aim is to document emerging lessons, reflections, and preliminary outcomes, drawing on systematically collected programmatic data and practitioner-derived insights from an evolving model that has yet to undergo formal external review.

The information presented herein is based on the following sources:

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- Intake and case management records gathered at key program junctures (i.e., arrival, midpoint, and exit);
 - Semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted by program staff with participants and, where relevant, their family members or community representatives;
 - Clinical notes and team reflections generated during weekly multidisciplinary meetings;
 - Routine monitoring instruments, including psychosocial progress indicators, behavioral observation logs, and education and vocational skills assessment rubrics.

Participants were not selected through a research sampling methodology; rather, the data reflect all 194 residential clients who took part in the program during the review period. They include former ISCAP members who were either captured or surrendered to the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) during Operation Shujaa Operation Shujaa—the joint mission between the UPDF and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC)—and were assessed as low-risk for further violence. This assessment was based on intelligence information, age and background, recruitment and exit pathways, rank and role within ISCAP, among other factors. A small number of clients were referred by the Ugandan Amnesty Commission and ASH's community partners. All participants were vetted by the UPDF and cleared for rehabilitation. Congolese nationals were subsequently re-vetted by the FARDC and other stakeholders upon repatriation before being reintegrated.

Authors' Positionality and Limitations

The insider positionality of the authors presents both epistemological strengths and limitations. On one hand, it enables granular, context-rich insights into the program's evolution and implementation. On the other, it introduces potential biases that warrant critical examination:

1. Lack of Independent Verification: All outcome claims are based on internal monitoring and staff assessments. To date, no independent evaluation has been conducted to corroborate these findings. To strengthen the credibility of our observations, we have drawn on multiple data streams, triangulated findings where possible, and engaged in ongoing reflective dialogue with program participants, yet we

acknowledge that independent, longitudinal evaluation is better positioned to assess the model's long-term impact, scalability, and cost-effectiveness. Accordingly, we encourage readers to interpret this paper as an informed practitioner narrative rather than a conclusive program evaluation.

2. **Confirmation Bias:** As those directly responsible for program delivery, we are inherently invested in its success. This proximity introduces a risk of confirmation bias, including the potential to overemphasize positive outcomes and under-recognize negative or contradictory evidence. Efforts to mitigate this bias have included multidisciplinary review processes and internal peer feedback, although we cannot claim full objectivity.
3. **Limited Generalizability:** ASH constitutes a bespoke intervention embedded within a highly specific institutional and geopolitical context—one characterized by cooperation with the Congolese and Ugandan governments, security sector engagement, community partnerships, and a carefully managed intake process. These conditions limit the model's replicability. Therefore, the transferability of insights to other contexts must be approached with caution and adapted as necessary.
4. **Over-Reliance on Self-Reported Data:** Much of the data is derived from participant self-reporting through interviews, group discussions, and reflective writing. While this is complemented by staff assessments and, in some cases, post-exit monitoring, the potential for social desirability bias remains significant. This is particularly salient in contexts where participants may perceive program completion as a pathway to social reintegration or legal leniency.
5. **Ethical Tensions in Referral Pathways:** A significant proportion of ASH participants are referred by national security agencies, often without formal legal processes or judicial oversight. While the program emphasizes voluntary participation, consent, and rights-based care, the dynamics inherent in such referral pathways present unresolved ethical challenges. These concerns are partially mitigated by internal protocols emphasizing informed consent and participant agency, but they remain an area for further normative and empirical inquiry.

By explicitly acknowledging these limitations, we do not seek to understate the potential value of the ASH model, but rather to present our findings with academic transparency and humility and to invite critical engagement and scholarly scrutiny in an under-researched and operationally complex area.

By presenting these reflections, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and empirically grounded discourse on what it truly takes to support recovery from violent extremism. Moreover, we hope to stimulate further academic inquiry into the operational realities, ethical dilemmas, and methodological challenges inherent in deradicalization and rehabilitation programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Defining Key Terms

For clarity and consistency, this paper adopts specific definitions for key terms central to ASH's approach. These definitions underpin the analysis of client outcomes and program effectiveness and align with current literature and practitioner perspectives in the field of countering violent extremism. *Radicalization* refers to the process by which individuals adopt extremist beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, often leading to support for or engagement in violence. *Rehabilitation*, in the ASH context, is a structured process of psychosocial, ideological, and practical support designed to help former extremists reintegrate into society as peaceful, productive citizens. It also includes empowering clients—who were once active threats—to counter extremist narratives, including through defection messaging and advocacy, thereby transforming them into agents of peace.

Defection refers to the voluntary disengagement of individuals from armed extremist groups, often prompted by disillusionment, fear, or external push-and-pull factors such as messaging campaigns or military pressure. *Deradicalization* denotes a cognitive and behavioral process whereby individuals abandon extremist ideologies and develop nonviolent, pluralistic worldviews; this process includes theological guidance, psychosocial support, and life skills training aimed at holistic transformation. *Recidivism*, as expansively defined by ASH, goes beyond the traditional understanding of reengagement in violent extremist activity. It also includes premature disengagement from the ASH rehabilitation program or disappearance from the reintegrated community—even in the absence of direct evidence of

rejoining extremist groups. This broader definition reflects the program's emphasis on sustained engagement and community stability as critical markers of success.

Understanding the Path to Radicalization: Origins and Evolution of ISCAP

To effectively deradicalize and reintegrate members of ISCAP, we must first understand the group's origins, evolution, recruitment, and radicalization tactics.

ISCAP traces its roots to Uganda in the early 1990s (Candland *et al.*, 2021), where disputes within the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) led to violent clashes, including an attack on the UMSC's Old Kampala Mosque and the arrest of Jamil Mukulu, a key figure in the group's formation. Upon his release in 1993, Mukulu founded the Salaf Foundation and its armed wing, which launched a failed insurgency in western Uganda. Fleeing to eastern Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)), Mukulu merged his fighters with the secular National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), forming the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). The ADF, supported by Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, initiated a violent cross-border insurgency into Uganda in 1996, serving as a proxy militia during the regional conflicts of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As regional wars subsided, external support for the ADF dwindled, and Ugandan military offensives eroded the group's capabilities. By 2007, the ADF ceased raids into Uganda and most NALU elements surrendered. The ADF became isolated in its Congolese jungle camps with its members living under strict Islamic law as interpreted by Mukulu, whose rhetoric focused on overthrowing the Ugandan government to establish an Islamic state, though this goal became increasingly unattainable (Candland *et al.*, 2021).

In 2013, intensified pressure from the Congolese military and UN peacekeepers led to a shift in the group's strategy. Mukulu began advocating for attacks on Congolese civilians, accusing them of supporting the military, and the ADF began launching indiscriminate massacres. After the group suffered heavy losses during a military operation in 2014, including the destruction of its "Madina" headquarters, Mukulu fled, and his deputy, Musa Baluku, assumed direct command of the camps. Mukulu continued to lead the group from afar

until his arrest in 2015, which further destabilized the organization and disrupted its external financing networks.

The arrival in 2016 of Meddie Nkalubo, a Ugandan national who would become a key figure in ISCAP, catalyzed a drastic realignment inside the camps (Weiss *et al.*, 2023). Nkalubo, influenced by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) propaganda, convinced Baluku to join ISIS. Tanzanian operative Ahmed Mahmood Hassan, known as Abuwakas, vetted the ADF on behalf of ISIS and facilitated its formal pledge of allegiance in October 2017, despite opposition from Mukulu loyalists (United Nations Security Council, 2023). This pledge, which was not made public until 2019, marked the ADF's transformation into ISCAP and to its adoption of ISIS's global jihadist ideology and violent tactics.

ISCAP's Shifts in Recruitment and Radicalization

The integration of the ADF into ISIS networks and its transition to ISCAP marked a significant shift in its tactics, recruitment, and radicalization methods (O'Farrell *et al.*, 2024). While previously limited in its operations due to dwindling finances, the group's alignment with ISIS (and, hence, access to ISIS financing) led to escalating violence and improvements in technology, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Financial networks tied to ISIS funneled significant resources into ISCAP, with one network transferring over \$280,000 from ISIS-Somalia to the group between 2019 and 2021 (Weiss *et al.*, 2023). This financial support enabled ISCAP to rebuild its ranks from just 400 - 450 fighters in 2018 to an estimated 1,500 - 2,000 by early 2023—an increase in capacity of 275% - 344%.

Recruitment patterns also evolved. Under Jamil Mukulu, the group relied primarily on Ugandan recruits, often lured under false pretenses or through family connections. Ugandans formed the bulk of the group's leadership and membership, which also included a significant number of enslaved Congolese abductees. While the group has continued to use deceptive and coercive recruitment methods, they now also recruit ideologically driven radicals from across East Africa, including Tanzanians, Kenyans, Burundians, and Somalis (Weiss *et al.*, 2023). These foreign recruits have taken on leadership roles, bolstered the group's operational capabilities, and further radicalized other members.

In recent years, ISCAP has intensified its reliance on violent abduction. According to open-source data gathered by the authors, between 2013 and 2017, the group abducted

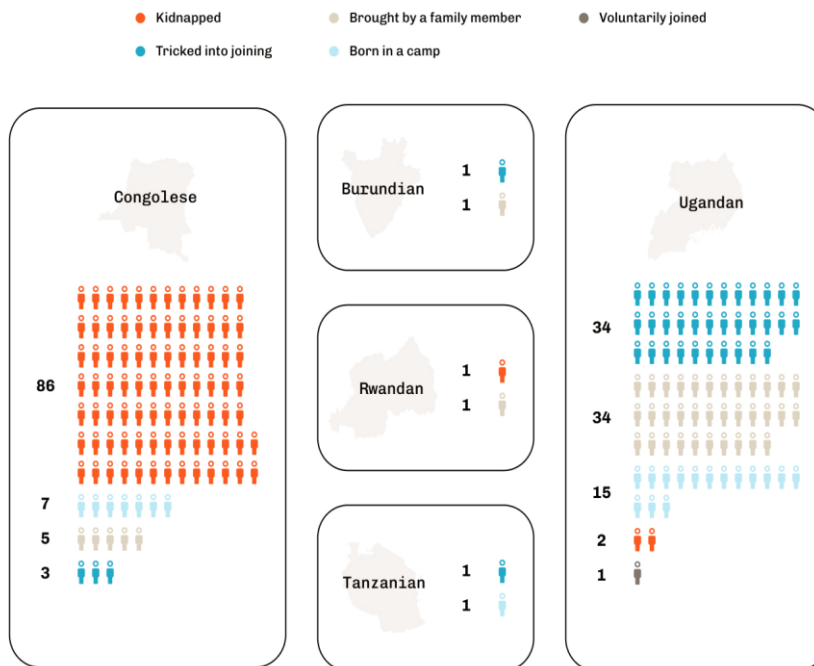
approximately 255 civilians (4.5 per month). Civilian abductions escalated markedly to over 2,595 (30 per month) from 2017 to 2023. This shift in tactics, framed by the group's leadership as a form of *daw'ah* (proselytizing), includes forcing abductees to convert to their hardline ideology framed as Islam or face execution. Those who convert undergo ideological indoctrination before being assigned roles within the group's operations. While many of ISCAP's foot soldiers were forcibly or deceptively recruited, the group's leaders and ideologues are deeply radicalized and continue to exploit a distorted interpretation of Islamic principles to justify their violent agenda, including deception and coercive tactics to recruit and control their members (O'Farrell *et al.*, 2024).

ISCAP's ideology and narratives have increasingly consolidated around five central, interconnected pillars. First, their interpretation of the *Ummah* (the Muslim community) enforces a divisive binary, demanding allegiance to their group while rejecting others, including fellow Muslims, and justifying violence against them as "disbelievers." Second, they promote a singular global caliphate under authoritarian rule, deeming resistance to this vision as apostasy warranting elimination. Third, they manipulate the concepts of *Hijra* (migration for religious reasons) and *Takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim as unbeliever) by urging migration to their camps as a religious obligation and justifying deception and abduction to their camps as permissible by Islam. Fourth, they claim to be fighting to establish a *Shari'ah* state, which they reduce to a rigid, punitive legal system. Finally, they misappropriate jihad by portraying it as constant warfare for dominance (O'Farrell *et al.*, 2024). Together, these pillars form a radical, exclusionary worldview that ASH counters with inclusive, authentic Islamic teachings that emphasize peace, justice, and coexistence.

Challenges of Deradicalization in the ISCAP Context

The evolution of ISCAP's recruitment and radicalization processes has significant implications for deradicalization efforts. As the graph below illustrates, the overwhelming number of ASH clients did not join the group voluntarily—46% said they were kidnapped, 21% were taken into the camps by family members, and 18% were deceived with false promises of a job or scholarship. Only one person said they joined voluntarily for ideological

reasons. Even if we assume that some of the 18% who claimed deception in order to be perceived as innocent were actually willing recruits, the number that joined the group by choice would still be small. This dynamic makes ISCAP relatively unique among jihadist groups. While many groups recruit voluntarily by exploiting grievances or offering incentives, the fact that ISCAP heavily depends on coercion and trickery undermines the ideological cohesion of its membership, potentially leaving it vulnerable to desertion and defection.



HOW CLIENTS JOINED ISIS-DRC, BY COUNTRY

Source: Self-reported data collected by Bridgeway Foundation during interviews with ASH clients. Client answers are verified with families and government officials when possible.

This is supported by the chart below, which shows that 28% of ASH clients defected from the group, meaning they chose to leave the group voluntarily and with the intention of surrendering, despite the huge risk involved. While the majority (53.6%) were captured following attacks by Operation Shujaa, many reported that they had no desire to remain in the

group but were too afraid to leave due to the risk to their lives. As a result, they deliberately stayed behind during attacks by Operation Shujaa when other members fled, hoping to be captured state forces. Thus, the majority of ASH clients—individuals who defected, those who escaped (meaning they left the group voluntarily and intentionally but lacked the same level of ideological and social assimilation as the clients who defected), and many of those who were captured—had no desire to remain in ISCAP.



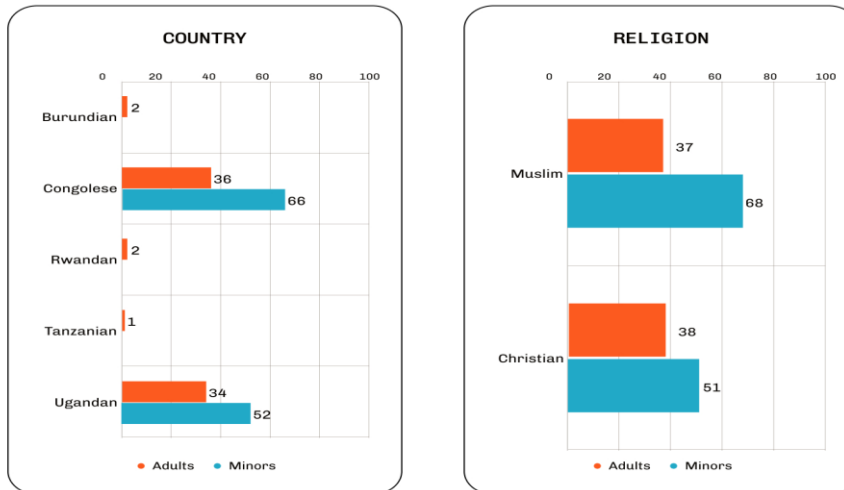
HOW CLIENTS LEFT ISIS-DRC, BY COUNTRY

Source: Self-reported data collected by Bridgeway Foundation during interviews with ASH clients. Client answers are verified with families and government officials when possible.

While the data concerning how clients joined and left ISCAP suggests that they may have less need for deradicalization, it is important to note that ISCAP’s leadership and senior commanders, who sustain the group, are deeply radicalized and some individuals—particularly Ugandan recruits—are drawn to the group for ideological reasons. Even individuals who were initially forced or tricked into joining may, over time, develop ideological commitments or

form social bonds with the group due to prolonged exposure, indoctrination, or phenomena like Stockholm syndrome—a psychological condition in which captives develop positive feelings toward their captors (Guy-Evans, 2025).

Furthermore, unlike many other armed groups in the DRC and across the region, which are often driven by local grievances, ethnic dynamics, or economic incentives, ISCAP is primarily an ideologically motivated group with transnational connections. Its core leadership and fighters adhere to a violent extremist ideology (O’Farrell *et al.*, 2024), making traditional disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) frameworks—focused on material incentives and community-based reintegration—less effective. A generic deradicalization model risks overlooking the deep-rooted ideological indoctrination that sustains ISCAP’s recruitment and cohesion. Compounding the challenge is ISCAP’s diverse composition. Unlike ethnically or regionally homogeneous groups in the DRC, ISCAP draws recruits from various national and cultural backgrounds.



ADULTS AND MINORS BY COUNTRY AND RELIGION

Source: Self-reported data collected by Bridgeway Foundation during interviews with ASH clients. Client answers are verified with families and government officials when possible.

To be effective, DDR initiatives targeting ISCAP combatants must integrate ideological deradicalization alongside traditional rehabilitation and reintegration measures, tailoring approaches that account for ideological convictions, socioeconomic drivers, and the

psychological trauma experienced by former extremist group members, and that are sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences among former members. Programs must focus on building trust and creating opportunities for defectors to safely disengage, while also addressing the broader socioeconomic vulnerabilities that ISCAP exploits to sustain its ranks. This requires a specialized approach that includes psychosocial support, religious counselling, and the involvement of credible community and religious leaders who can continue to provide ideological and spiritual guidance post-reintegration. Addressing these complexities is precisely what ASH strives to achieve.

Overview of Al Shifa Home

Al Shifa Home (ASH), established in November 2021 as East Africa's first private rehabilitation center for former violent extremists, is a key part of Bridgeway Foundation's three-pronged strategy to significantly weaken ISCAP's ability to carry out civilian atrocities. The other two components of the strategy are Defection Messaging, which targets ISCAP members with fliers and loudspeaker broadcasts urging them to defect, and Research & Investigations, focused on exposing and disrupting the group's financial sources, recruitment networks, and operations.

ASH is funded through private philanthropic support. Its principal funder is the Bridgeway Foundation, the charitable arm of Bridgeway Capital Management, a U.S.-based investment firm that donates 50% of its profits over time to the Foundation. The Bridgeway Foundation has a long-standing commitment to supporting peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and counter-extremism efforts, particularly in fragile states. ASH also receives generous support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, which has invested in innovative approaches to stabilization, post-conflict recovery, and violence reduction across Africa and the globe. These private philanthropic sources have provided the flexibility and long-term commitment needed to design and implement a high-intensity, trauma-informed, and context-sensitive program. ASH's dependence on unique private philanthropic funding may pose challenges for replicability in other contexts; however, its model provides valuable lessons that can be adapted and scaled with sufficient resources and strong local partnerships.

ASH's theory of change asserts that by providing tailored mental health and psychological support (MHPSS), targeted deradicalization and religious counseling services, and sustainable reintegration and livelihood opportunities, former ISCAP members can successfully reintegrate into their communities. This is possible because the program addresses the underlying trauma of life in the bush and the psychological issues that may have driven them to join in the first place, dismantles the radical ideology that fosters isolation and the desire to rejoin, and offers a viable means of economic self-reliance—tackling the poverty that may have made them susceptible to extremism or false promises.

Successful reintegration of former extremists has at least three vital effects: 1) Reducing the likelihood of former members' re-engagement in violent extremism or criminal activities; 2) strengthening social acceptance and community resilience; and 3) through the visible success of reintegrated individuals, serving as a catalyst for further defections, amplifying the impact of counter-extremist messaging, and reducing ISCAP's appeal. Progress is tracked through measurable outcomes, including reduced recidivism and increased defections. Through its holistic approach, ASH plays a vital role in fostering regional stability and works to serve as a model for addressing the complex challenges of violent extremism.

To achieve its objectives, ASH has formed strategic partnerships with the governments of the DRC, where ISCAP is based and operates, and Uganda, where many of the group's top leaders and fighters originated. These partnerships help vet and enroll clients, grant amnesty to graduates, and support ASH's family engagement and reintegration initiatives. In September 2022, the Bridgeway Foundation facilitated a bilateral agreement between Uganda and the DRC, signed in Kinshasa, to ensure the humane treatment and systematic exchange of defectors between the two countries.

After a year and a half spent developing curriculum, recruiting and training staff, preparing the facility, and supporting non-residential clients who had been disengaged from the group for some time, ASH enrolled its first residential cohort. Initially, ASH focused on serving women and children, launching its first site to meet their specific needs and enrolling five middle-aged women in the inaugural cohort. Beginning with women and children allowed the center to test its model with a group equally in need of support yet often less violent or physically dangerous. In April 2023, having gained more experience, won the trust of its partners, and refined its systems, ASH expanded to include a second site for male

clients. By November 2024, ASH had graduated six cohorts, comprising 194 Ugandan, Congolese, Tanzanian, Burundian, and Rwandan clients of all ages, including defectors, rescuees, and those arrested or intercepted.

What's Unique About Al Shifa Home

ASH is the first rehabilitation center of its kind in East Africa. Although there have been deradicalization efforts in Uganda, they have been limited primarily to a prison-based program focusing on the disengagement and ideological rehabilitation of detained violent extremists and prevention of radicalization in prisons (UNODC Eastern Africa, n.d.). While this program is important, it does not cover the many violent extremists who do not go through the justice system due to Uganda's broad amnesty law, and it lacks a comprehensive framework for post-release reintegration, leaving former detainees vulnerable to stigmatization and re-radicalization upon their return to society.

Similarly, there have been many DDR efforts in the DRC, but all have been characterized by significant gaps and weaknesses (Thill, 2021, p. 3). These programs have been sporadic and poorly structured, lumping together former members of many different armed groups that have completely disparate motives and tactics. In addition, the rehabilitation aspect of these programs remains critically underdeveloped, giving minimal, if any, attention to addressing deeply rooted extremist ideologies or the psychosocial effects of violence; reintegration efforts have been identified as the "weakest link" of DDR programs in the DRC (Thill, 2021, pp. 4 & 5). These shortcomings not only undermine the effectiveness of deradicalization initiatives but also risk perpetuating cycles of radicalization and violence.

ASH's approach to deradicalization stands out in several important respects, even among programs focused on ideologically motivated individuals. Firstly, some deradicalization programs, especially those in Europe, tend to focus primarily on addressing the socio-economic and political grievances of former fighters, often neglecting the ideological aspect of radicalization (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019; Borum, 2011; Miller & Fenton, 2015; Neumann, 2013; and Schmid, 2013). This focus can be partly attributed to concerns about stigmatizing Muslim communities or the fear of being perceived as Islamophobic or of alienating individuals by focusing too heavily on clients' extremist beliefs. Instead, these programs tend to emphasize social reintegration, job opportunities, and remedies for social

concerns such as alienation and marginalization. While these factors are undoubtedly important and the concerns and fears understandable, neglecting the ideological motivations of extremists can undermine the effectiveness of such programs.

In contrast, Muslim-majority countries like Saudi Arabia have traditionally focused more on ideological reform by attempting to counter violent extremist ideologies through intensive theological education (Mullins, 2018; Horgan, 2014; and Lynch, 2016). However, this ideological focus often comes at the expense of addressing the socioeconomic and psychological drivers of radicalization, such as unemployment, trauma, and disenfranchisement.

Research has shown that addressing only one aspect of radicalization may not be sufficient to prevent reoffending or re-engagement with violent extremist groups (Bukarti, 2019). ASH's model seeks to give equal attention to the ideological, socioeconomic, and psychological factors contributing to radicalization and addresses underlying grievances, provides trauma support, and promotes ideological transformation.

Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), for former Boko Haram members, takes a broadly similar approach to that of ASH. However, unlike ASH, which has a well-developed and comprehensive framework, OSC, which is led by the Nigerian army, is still rudimentary, using only a random selection of verses that preach peaceful coexistence rather than directly targeting the ideological pillars of Boko Haram (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019). Secondly, OSC, like many deradicalization programs around the world, does not adequately support women (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019). In contrast, ASH prioritizes women's participation and provides them with equal support to men. This attention to women in its program demonstrates ASH's commitment to a truly inclusive and balanced model that ensures that both men and women benefit equally from reintegration services, both inside the center and after leaving ASH.

Finally, ASH's two-year follow-up program, which provides continuous monitoring and support to clients and their immediate families after reintegration, is an important distinguishing feature. Many programs, particularly in countries like Nigeria and the DRC, fail to offer adequate post-rehabilitation support, which weakens the reintegration process and increases the risk of recidivism. By offering extended care, ASH ensures that participants have a safety net to navigate challenges during their transition back into society.

Al Shifa Home's Departments and Functions

ASH operates through three interconnected departments—MHPSS, Deradicalization and Spiritual Counselling (DSC), and Reintegration and Livelihood Support (RLS)—each addressing critical and interconnected aspects of the client rehabilitation process. While the three departments work in coordination and collaboration to support each client, the level of intervention by each department is tailored to meet the specific needs of each individual. For instance, a client who willingly joined ISCAP may receive greater focus from the DSC department, whereas a client with severe trauma challenges might require more intensive therapy sessions. Together, these departments form a holistic framework that supports individual recovery while fostering sustainable reintegration into society.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum at ASH was developed through a rigorous, context-sensitive process that blended empirical research, practitioner expertise, and lessons from international best practices in rehabilitation and deradicalization programming. It was informed by four primary sources:

1. Bridgeway Foundation's Primary Research

The program draws heavily from more than five years of in-depth field research conducted by Bridgeway Foundation teams, including interviews with over 200 former ISCAP fighters, focusing on the group's ideology, narratives, and recruitment strategies. This was complemented by the first author's prior research spanning over 15 years on the ideologies of violent extremist groups—particularly in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel—as well as on Nigeria's deradicalization program for former Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province members and the challenges of similar efforts in Niger and Chad (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019; Bukarti, 2019; Bukarti, 2020). These insights offered firsthand understanding of indoctrination processes and the realities faced by defectors.

2. Adaptation of Existing Models

The ASH model incorporates elements of Nigeria's OSC, particularly its three-pronged approach to reintegration—spiritual, psychosocial, and vocational (Bukarti &

Bryson, 2019; Bukarti, 2019). However, significant modifications were made to address OSC's limitations, such as insufficient theological depth, inadequate psychological support, and weak post-program follow-up. Other programs reviewed include those in Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, and Afghanistan, primarily examined through secondary literature.

3. Scholarly Frameworks and Practitioner Tools

ASH's development of the curriculum also drew on established international frameworks and practitioner tools to ensure global relevance and methodological rigor. Notably, the team consulted *Hedayah's Blueprint for a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Center* (Gyte, Zeiger & Hunter, 2021), which offers a comprehensive guide for designing and implementing effective rehabilitation initiatives. In addition, the work of scholars in this field such as (Koehler, 2017) and Koehler & Fiebig (2019) was especially influential to ASH's curriculum development.

4. Theological Sources and Discourse

The theological strand of the curriculum is grounded in primary Islamic sources—the Qur'an and Hadith—as well as classical and contemporary Islamic texts addressing relevant topics. Key references include the first author's PhD study (Bukarti, 2024), scholars frequently cited by extremist groups, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim, whose works were intentionally incorporated to counter extremist narratives using sources that resonate ideologically with ISCAP members. Contemporary scholarship was also utilized to understand the evolution of jihadist thought and to construct credible theological counter-arguments (e.g., Maher, 2017).

Staff Recruitment and Training

ASH deliberately assembled a multidisciplinary team, carefully selecting individuals based not only on their academic credentials and relevant field experience but also on their alignment with the center's rehabilitative philosophy and long-term mission. The team includes individuals with varied linguistic, cultural, national and religious identities, allowing them to communicate effectively and respond appropriately to the specific needs and worldviews of each client.

Recruitment criteria varied across departments, reflecting the specialized roles each team played. For the MHPSS department, ASH sought professionals with at least a bachelor's degree in clinical psychology or counseling. These individuals were also expected to have hands-on experience providing trauma therapy, particularly in contexts involving survivors of armed conflict. In the RLS and Residential Supervision unit, the emphasis was on practical experience and community care. Staff were required to hold at least a diploma in social work, education, or a related field, and to have previously worked with vulnerable populations in residential or institutional environments.

The DSC is composed of individuals with deep religious and social knowledge. Members were expected to have a diploma or higher qualification in Islamic studies or social work, complemented by extensive formal or informal Islamic education. Recognizing the ideological nature of the challenge, ASH prioritized recruiting Salafi-trained imams or assistant imams—particularly those with credibility and standing in local communities. These individuals were well-positioned to engage participants with authenticity and intellectual rigor, challenging extremist narratives from within the same theological framework that participants had previously subscribed to.

While Salafism is often misunderstood as rigid or intolerant, and ISCAP exploits Salafi teachings by selectively using texts from scholars like Ibn Taymiyya to justify violence and takfiri exclusion, effective disengagement from ASH must involve dialogue within a theological framework familiar to clients, and must offer counter-readings of extremist ideology that are rooted in mainstream Salafi orthodoxy. Salafi imams who reject violence are therefore credible interlocutors for ASH clients (Senzai & McCants, 2015). Thus, ASH strategically employs Salafi-trained imams who are carefully vetted and who reject violent extremism. Their role is to challenge violent justifications, create cognitive dissonance in ISCAP ideology, and promote cognitive flexibility by starting with trusted Salafi critiques before gradually introducing broader Islamic perspectives. This pragmatic approach, mirrored in Saudi Arabia's deradicalization efforts (Senzai & McCants, 2015; Horgan, 2014), effectively initiates ideological disengagement.

Staff in all departments underwent intensive in-house training tailored to the complex needs of the program, including the ideological foundations of ISCAP and similar extremist groups, basic and advanced strategies for deradicalization and disengagement, trauma-

informed care and psychosocial support, child safeguarding and ethical engagement with vulnerable individuals, and pedagogical methods tailored for adult learners and experiential learning environments. The staff are trained to be culturally and religiously sensitive, reflecting the diverse backgrounds of the clients they serve. Staff engage in continuous education and professional development opportunities, including specialized trainings or workshops delivered in-house or by guest resource persons as well as opportunities to attend conferences or pursue advanced academic scholarship.

This rigorous recruitment and training process ensures that ASH staff are not only professionally competent but also empathetic, resilient, and aligned with the center's mission to rehabilitate and reintegrate former violent extremists into society.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Department

ASH's MHPSS department provides essential therapy to guide clients toward recovery from the profound psychological effects of loss, anger, hunger, participating in and witnessing horrific violence, and surviving air strikes and harsh conditions in ISCAP camps. This department's primary focus is to equip clients with new and positive coping strategies, such as behavioral activation, relaxation exercises, and grounding techniques. Through consistent practice, these strategies help clients manage their symptoms effectively, build resilience, and better prepare for future challenges as they transition through reintegration.

Therapy Methodology and Treatment Approaches

ASH's therapeutic framework is guided by Herman (2002)'s three-stage recovery model:

1. Safety and Stabilization

The initial focus is on building trust with the clients, addressing immediate emotional and physical needs, and teaching techniques such as deep breathing and grounding exercises. For example, clients who initially struggle with hypervigilance and guilt learn, over a four-week period, to challenge negative thoughts, regulate emotions, and incorporate stress management techniques into their daily routine.

2. Remembrance and Mourning

Clients process traumatic memories in a safe environment, reorganizing their narratives to reduce emotional intensity and foster closure. For instance, women who lost children in captivity use sand tray therapy to express long-suppressed emotions, facilitating their healing and self-understanding. Group therapy sessions also play a critical role by providing shared experiences, encouraging empathy and strengthening coping mechanisms.

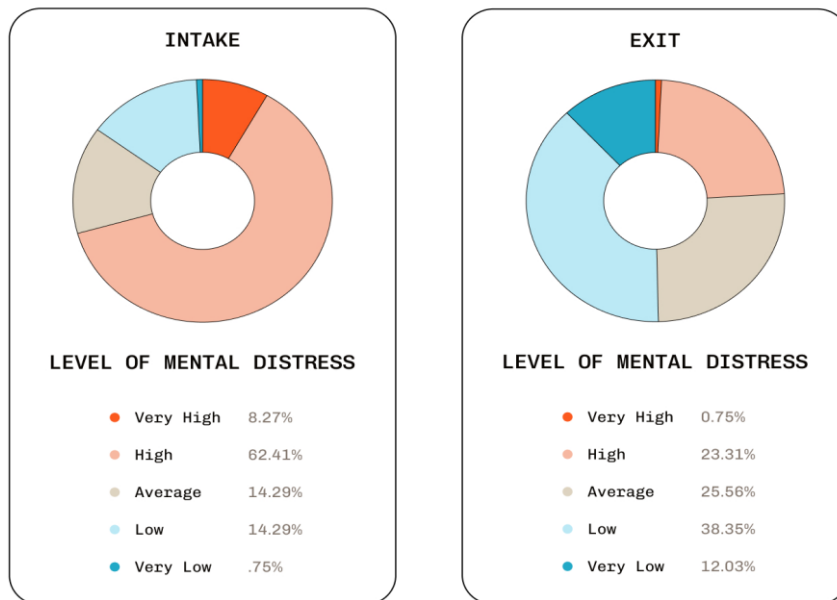
3. Reconnection and Integration

The final stage focuses on rebuilding identity, rediscovering interests, and fostering resilience. Clients engage in skills-building activities, self-reflection exercises, and role-plays to prepare for reintegration.

Outcome of MHPSS Department

The use of the above intervention at ASH has been transformative in enabling clients to process trauma, build coping strategies, and rebuild trust. Through these approaches, clients gain awareness of their mental health symptoms and develop an understanding of their reactions to them. PTSD is the most prevalent condition, with over 90% of clients presenting related symptoms at intake. Other common conditions include depression and anxiety, with a smaller proportion experiencing other psychological disorders. While challenges such as mistrust and grief remain, consistent, empathetic care tailored to individual needs ensures meaningful progress.

Clients undergo multiple psychological assessments—depending on individual needs—using internationally recognized and validated tools, such as the SRQ-20, the Posttraumatic Stress Scale–Self Report, 5th Edition (PSS-SR5), the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) (Kroenke et al., 2001; Spitzer et al., 2006)—to evaluate distress levels and symptom severity. Following therapy, 82% of clients reported a reduction in distress compared to their initial screening responses and 90% of clients experienced a decrease in PTSD symptoms. Many clients reported that therapy enabled them to acknowledge and process their thoughts and emotions rather than suppress them, helping them focus on the present and make more value-driven decisions. However, 10% continued at approximately the same level of PTSD symptoms, underscoring the need for tailored interventions that address individual circumstances.



CLIENT MENTAL HEALTH

Source: Created by Bridgeway Foundation using SRQ-20 results.

The results reveal variations in psychological responses across different demographic groups, particularly between men and women, children and adults, and Congolese and Ugandan participants.

Men and women differ in how they respond to psychological assessments at intake, though these differences diminish as trust builds over time. Men are more likely to underreport symptoms likely due to societal norms that equate emotional vulnerability with weakness. Additionally, men generally exhibit poorer health-seeking behavior than women, which can lead to a perceived increase in distress symptoms as therapy progresses. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to present with depressive symptoms, often linked to the loss of loved ones—especially children and relatives who died or remain in the camps.

Children and adults also display distinct patterns of psychological distress. Most children present with physical ailments rather than overt psychological symptoms. Unlike adults, they do not always exhibit clear signs of PTSD or anxiety, likely due to the protective presence of their mothers or caregivers and the child-friendly environment at the center.

When children do show PTSD symptoms, these are often subtle and manifest through negative changes in cognition and behavior. Such symptoms are observed in the types of games they play, their selection of miniatures or toys during sand tray sessions, and their heightened reactions to loud noises. By contrast, adults typically experience PTSD symptoms in the form of re-experiencing and avoidance. These symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, and efforts to avoid conversations, places, or situations that trigger traumatic memories.

Differences also emerge between Congolese and Ugandan participants. Congolese clients tend to exhibit higher levels of psychological distress, likely due to the traumatic nature of their abduction—often at gunpoint—and the cruel treatment they endured in captivity, where many were enslaved. While both groups showed significant improvements in PTSD, anxiety, and depression symptoms in early stages, some Congolese clients—particularly in earlier cohorts—displayed inconsistencies in their post-treatment assessments. These variations were largely driven by heightened fears, uncertainty, and concerns related to family tracing and repatriation. However, after adjustments were made to ensure Congolese clients received family tracing feedback before leaving the center—similar to the process for Ugandans—their results became more stable. This demonstrates the significant impact of external stressors on therapeutic outcomes and highlights the importance of addressing contextual factors in MHPSS interventions.

Challenges and Lessons Learned from the MHPSS Department

A core lesson from the ASH program has been the foundational role of safety in trauma recovery. Many clients arrive deeply scarred by captivity and violence, burdened by fear and emotional paralysis. Effective therapy begins only when clients feel safe emotionally as well as physically.

We have learned that even seemingly simple practices—sharing meals, playing football, dancing, watching television together, minimizing bureaucracy, employing plain-clothed (instead of uniformed) security personnel, and providing open spaces and fresh air—are vital to building trust.

Yet to establish trust is one of our biggest challenges. Many clients arrived with intense mistrust, shaped by manipulation and betrayal before and during their time with

violent groups. Some withheld information or shared distorted versions of their experiences. Overcoming this required time, patience, and deep respect for client autonomy. Therapists built rapport gradually, through consistent presence and genuine empathy.

Grief surfaced as a powerful, often overlooked, barrier to recovery. While many clients carried guilt for their roles in violence, it was their personal losses—especially the death of children—that often caused the deepest pain. Women, in particular, were frequently overwhelmed by sorrow, and their grief hindered engagement in therapy. Addressing this required safe, compassionate spaces to process loss and guilt and foster the possibility of hope.

Another persistent challenge was the presence of untreated physical and psychological conditions. Clients often arrived with ailments like postpartum complications or pre-existing mental health issues that had never been addressed. ASH responded by integrating medical care with psychosocial support to ensure holistic healing.

Mood disorders such as depression and anxiety were also common, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness widespread. Therapy focused on rebuilding clients' sense of self and belonging, using techniques that promoted optimism and reconnected them to a sense of purpose.

Together, these experiences reaffirmed the importance of person-centered care that starts from where clients are—emotionally, physically, and spiritually—and walks with them toward healing.

Al Shifa Home's Deradicalization Approach and Methodology

ISCAP's radicalization process aligns closely with the "de-pluralization" theory (Koehler, 2015, 2017, pp. 74 – 80), wherein a group narrows its recruits' political views by emphasizing a singular core issue—*kufir* (unbelief)—which it frames as the root cause of all global and personal problems, such as poverty and discrimination. By exploiting these grievances, ISCAP presents the establishment of a strict Islamic state as the only solution and creates intense psychological pressure to act, presenting violence as the only means to achieving the envisioned utopian future and dismissing nonviolent alternatives as ineffective and anti-Islam.

This distorted view of faith and its social remedy produces in recruits a mindset that is narrow, binary, and violent.

ASH works to re-pluralize clients' worldview by re-expanding their political concepts and values to integrate multiple perspectives and present life challenges in a multifaceted way, proposing alternative visions of the future and multiple means of getting there, without the use of violence (Koehler, 2017, pp. 80 – 83). ASH does this by targeting the concepts, teachings, and scriptural references most exploited by ISCAP and introducing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of Islamic teachings, emphasizing values of peace, justice, and coexistence. Through this process of re-pluralization, the ASH program reintegrates recruits into a worldview that embraces diversity, peace, and mutual respect and provides them with alternative, nonviolent paths that enable them to reject extremist behavior in favor of a more harmonious existence.

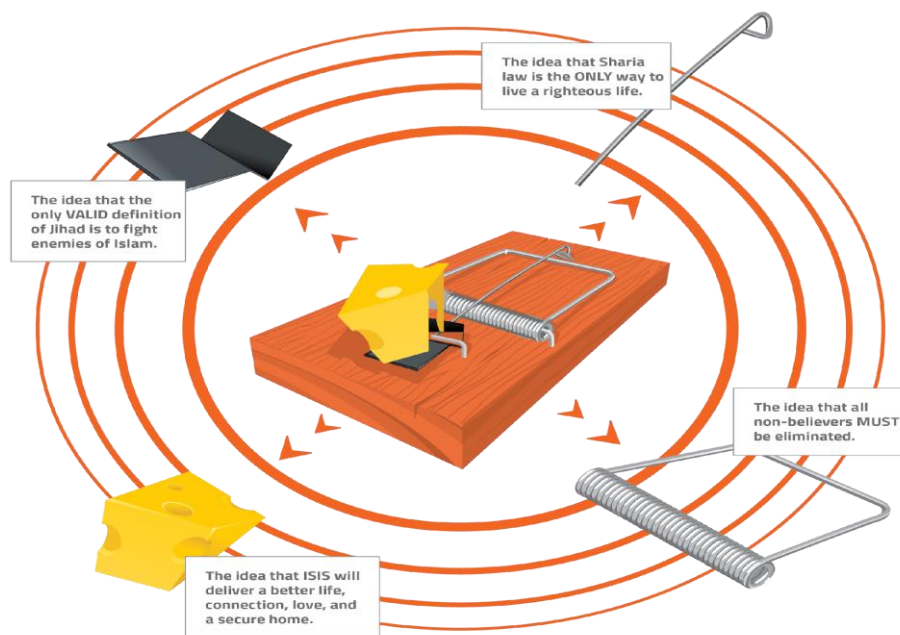
Al Shifa Home's Mousetrap Strategy

One of the most effective strategies developed at ASH is what we refer to as the Mousetrap Strategy, which plays a central role in dismantling the ideological hold of ISCAP over ASH clients. This section outlines how the strategy operates and why it has proven so effective in guiding individuals away from extremism.

Like many extremist organizations, ISCAP constructs an ideological “mousetrap” designed to capture and radicalize individuals. This mousetrap consists of several interconnected beliefs that create a rigid and narrow worldview. At the heart of this ideology is the belief in a divinely appointed caliph, the obligation to fight for the establishment of an Islamic state, the rejection of secular systems in favor of strict Islamic law, the dehumanization of outsiders as enemies, and the promise of paradise for those who die as martyrs in their violent cause. These beliefs are mutually reinforcing, forming a system where accepting one belief necessitates embracing all the others. If any part of this system is questioned or rejected, the entire ideological structure collapses, reducing the individual's commitment to violent extremism. This idea mirrors the concept of “irreducible complexity”, introduced by Behe (1996), which argues that certain systems rely on multiple, interdependent components to function properly.

A cornerstone of ASH's approach is presenting nonviolent interpretations of Islamic teachings as alternatives to extremist narratives. For instance, while ISCAP and similar groups glorify martyrdom through violence, ASH emphasizes fundamental Islamic principles such as mercy, the sanctity of life, and peaceful coexistence. By offering these perspectives, ASH helps clients recognize that violent interpretations are neither the only nor the most authentic expressions of Islam, and that peaceful, faith-based paths exist for pursuing justice and meaningful change.

Rather than focusing solely on changing a recruit's deeply held views, ASH aims to disrupt the manifestation of those views in violent behavior. The goal is not to argue that the belief in jihad or martyrdom, for example, is inherently wrong, but to present alternative interpretations of these concepts and encourage recruits to question the necessity of violence to living a meaningful life. By weakening the links between interrelated beliefs, ASH renders the ideological mousetrap ineffective. Recruits are encouraged to reconsider violence as a solution to their problems, gradually loosening their commitment to extremist actions without the need to directly challenge every belief, some of which may be held deeply and personally.



Source: Created by Bridgeway Foundation.

Deradicalization Curriculum

ASH addresses the ideological foundations of ISCAP through a deradicalization curriculum rooted in Salafi traditions. While mainstream Salafis unequivocally reject the violence and ideology of groups like ISCAP, the group's claim of adherence to Salafi interpretations makes this tradition particularly effective in challenging ISCAP's narratives. The deradicalization program provides counterarguments to ISCAP's core ideological tenets: the *ummah*, the *khilafah*, *hijrah* and *takfir*, *Shari'ah*, and *jihad*. The department's theory of change is that the more clients understand the context, nuance, and differing interpretations of the concepts ISCAP uses to manipulate its members, the less likely it will be for returnees to re-engage in violent extremist behavior. Credible studies have found that the more education

in Islamic education someone has, the less likely they are to join violent extremist groups (Bukarti, 2017 and UNDP, 2017, 39 – 41). By focusing on the specific teachings and doctrines most exploited by ISCAP, ASH can provide accelerated understanding of these core Islamic teachings and how ISCAP distorts them.

The *Ummah*

The concept of *ummah* is central to ISCAP’s ideology, which, like other similar groups, it defines as a global Muslim community that transcends national borders and affiliations and must come together to subdue its enemies. This interpretation enforces an exclusive and divisive binary of loyalty, demanding allegiance to the group while rejecting all who do not subscribe to its ideology, even other Muslims. ISCAP justifies the killing of non-Muslim civilians on the grounds of their “disbelief” and of Muslims for being apostates (O’Farrell *et al.*, 2024).

ASH counters this narrative by promoting a more inclusive understanding of the *ummah*. This broader view not only includes all Muslims but also champions peaceful coexistence, unity, and solidarity among all humanity, regardless of faith or background. Thus, while ISCAP reduces the concept of the *ummah* to a binary of “us versus them,” ASH promotes an inclusive understanding of the *ummah* that extends beyond the confines of a specific group, highlighting the importance of peaceful coexistence with all people.

The *Khilafah*

In alignment with the vision of a unified global Muslim *ummah*, ISCAP insists that true faith can only be realized under a singular caliphate. The group’s camps are an integral part of this caliphate, with authority vested in successive ISIS caliphs. ISCAP leaders claim to be governors and direct representatives of the ISIS caliph, receiving orders from Iraq and Syria. ISIS’s ultimate goal, which it considers a divine duty, is to expand its caliphate across the globe. Those who refuse to swear allegiance (*bay’a*) to the caliph or resist the caliphate are labelled apostates, justifying their targeting and elimination through the group’s violent interpretation of jihad.

ASH counters this narrative by emphasizing classical and contemporary Islamic law and traditions, which reject the notion of a singular, global caliphate as a requirement for

genuine faith. Historically, Islamic governance has been diverse, with leadership chosen through consultative processes (*Shura*) rather than imposed through authoritarian rule. ASH highlights the interpretation of the many Muslim scholars who view the *ummah* as a spiritual community, not bound by a single political structure, and promotes Islam's emphasis on mutual respect and tolerance, challenging the idea that a caliphate is required for true faith.

Hijra and Takfir

ISCAP preachers emphasize the necessity for Muslims to leave the “land of disbelief” (*Dar al-Kufr*) (for example, countries such as Uganda, the DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, or Tanzania) and migrate to its camps in Eastern DRC, which they describe as the “land of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*). By framing the world in this binary division, the group persuades recruits that *hijrah* (emigration) to their camps, which they term “*Madinah al-Hijrah wa al-Tawhid*” (the city/headquarters for migration and Islamic monotheism), is a religious obligation. They even resort to deception and abductions to populate their camps, claiming both are permitted by Allah for the sake of jihad (O’Farrell *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, they label Muslims who do not emigrate as apostates, justifying their killing and discouraging defection through threats of violence.

To counter this narrative, ASH introduces the concept of *Dar al-Sulh* (territory of treaty) which is grounded within the same Islamic tradition but ignored by ISCAP. *Dar al-Sulh* refers to places where Muslims and non-Muslims live peacefully and harmoniously, with each having the freedom to practice their faith. Countries like Uganda, the DRC, and Kenya qualify as *Dar al-Sulh*, negating the necessity of *hijrah* and waging jihad. ASH also educates participants on the strict conditions for *takfir* (excommunication) in Islamic law, emphasizing that no individual or group has the authority to declare others as apostates or use this as a justification for violence. This is the function of duly constituted courts of law.

Shari’ah

ISCAP claims that its ultimate goal is to establish a *Shari’ah* state governed by its interpretation of Islamic law. The group reduces the *Shari’ah* to a rigid system of state-enforced laws and rejects secularism, democracy, and man-made legislation, and portrays its camps as sanctuaries of Islamic purity. ASH provides a balanced perspective, explaining that

Islamic law, the vast part of which is about good human conduct, is a dynamic, juristic framework that allows for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), diverse interpretations, and flexibility. By focusing on the Qur'anic principles of justice, compassion, and equity, ASH contrasts these values with ISCAP's authoritarian misuse of the *Shari'ah*, underscoring Islam's true ethical and humane foundation.

Jihad

Like all other similar groups across the world, ISCAP misappropriates the concept of jihad to justify its violent campaigns, equating jihad with indiscriminate warfare. The group's rigid, globalized interpretation presents violence as a central religious obligation for establishing a *Shari'ah* state. It frames its violence as a divine cause for which its fighters will be rewarded by Allah if they are killed—making them martyrs—or maimed. ISCAP links the obligation of *hijrah* to jihad, framing emigration as necessary not only for the purpose of living a pure religious life but also for waging war. It claims to be using jihad to combat perceived enemies and enforces ideological conformity through violence against defectors and critics.

ASH counters this interpretation by presenting the full spectrum of the meaning of jihad, including personal and communal efforts for self-improvement and societal development. Drawing on authoritative Islamic sources, ASH emphasizes that jihad primarily involves an internal struggle for self-betterment and peaceful preaching. Armed jihad, when sanctioned, is strictly limited to defensive purposes declared by legitimate Islamic authorities under specific conditions, such as repelling military aggression or protecting religious freedom. Even then, Islamic law unequivocally prohibits targeting non-combatants (Bukarti, 2024).

ASH uses primary Islamic sources that define jihad as ethical and constructive pursuits, such as controlling one's bad desires, rather than trying to control others; speaking against injustice, rather than committing injustice against innocent civilians; and caring for one's family, rather than abandoning them for ISCAP's violent ideology. This broader understanding directly challenges ISIS's narrow, destructive narrative, emphasizing that true jihad aligns with peace, justice, and the betterment of humanity. By broadening the meaning

of *jihad*, ASH presents clients with alternative, peaceful ways of earning Allah's rewards, thus becoming peaceful mujahidin of sorts.

In addition to the above, ASH offers sessions covering a variety of supplementary themes, including family relations, respect for humanity, and the role of religion in conflict resolution. It also provides activities aimed at promoting spiritual growth, community, and worship. These include the five daily prayers; lectures on Islamic teachings, moral conduct, and contemporary issues; and special prayers such as *Jumu'ah* services and *Taraweeh* during Ramadan. While all clients assessed for deradicalization participate in the relevant sessions, the spiritual activities are exclusively for Muslim clients. Their Christian counterparts—as many, primarily Congolese, clients revert to their original religion after having converted to Islam in the camps under threat of execution—attend services led by staff members who are also pastors. This approach ensures religious freedom and meets the spiritual needs of all clients.

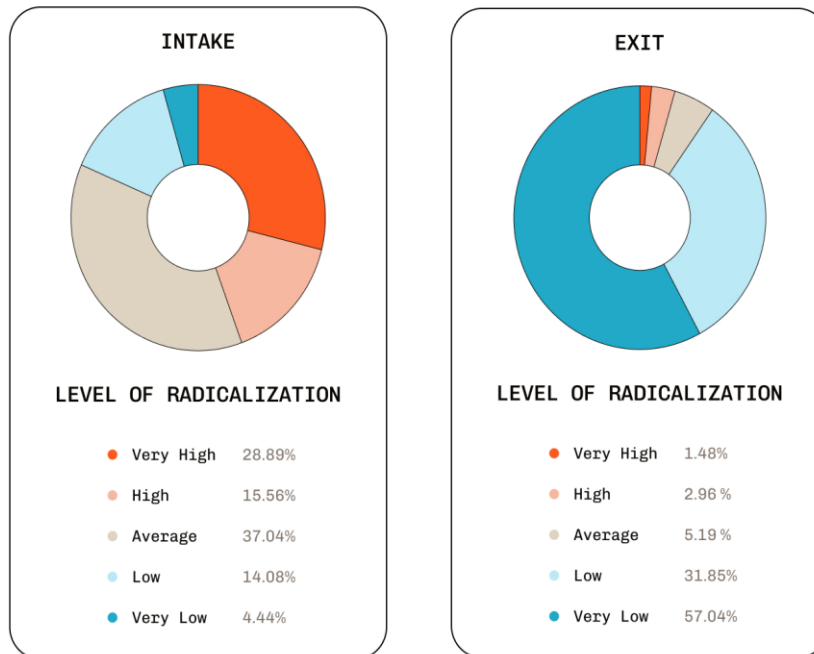
After completing the program, clients who need further support or are interested in this area continue to receive spiritual guidance and are referred to appropriate programs at schools, mosques, or churches to deepen their understanding of their faith.

Deradicalization Outcomes

The DSC Department uses an internally developed Ideological Assessment Questionnaire (IAQ), informed by Bridgeway Foundation's research, field experience, and existing models, to evaluate clients' deradicalization outcomes. The IAQ has not yet undergone external peer review or independent validation—though such processes are planned for the near future. The DSC Department's interventions have yielded significant positive results. Of the 135 clients assessed, 81.5% had a radicalization level ranging from average to very high, while 18.5% exhibited low or very low radicalization. Upon completing the deradicalization curriculum, 88.9% of clients demonstrated low or very low radicalization, while 6.7% remained in the average category.

Six clients remained in the high or very high categories of radicalization. The two clients in the very high level of radicalization were returned to the UPDF for further action, while those assessed as having a high level of radicalization at the end of the program continued to receive support from ASH staff and were referred to local mosques and social

services for ongoing intervention and support. This approach ensures that individuals with higher levels of radicalization receive continuous specialized attention, enabling a more targeted and comprehensive response to their reintegration.



IDEOLOGICAL STATUS OF CLIENTS

Source: Created by Bridgeway Foundation using program records

The assessments reveal only a slight difference between men and women in radicalization levels. Of the 65 eligible men assessed upon entry, 46% fell into the high and very high radicalization categories, compared to 41.4% of the 70 women. This challenges the stereotype that women are not ideologically motivated to join violent extremist groups. By the end of the program, 78.5% of the men had shifted to the low and very low radicalization categories, while 88.5% of the women had done so.

While women showed slightly greater improvement, men tended to engage in more religious and ideological debate during sessions—likely due to their leadership roles within ISCAP and deeper involvement in the group’s ideological discourse. This suggests that

deradicalization programs should adopt tailored approaches that account for differences in learning styles and gender differences in ideological engagement.

Among the 27 children (aged 8 – 13) who qualified for deradicalization support, 46% were classified as highly or very highly radicalized at entry. By exit, 54% had shifted to the low or very low categories, while the remaining 46% had moved to the average category. However, children’s initial high radicalization scores do not necessarily indicate deep ideological commitment. Rather, their radicalization was largely the result of indoctrination and limited exposure to diverse Islamic teachings, underscoring the importance of quality religious education as a key tool for both deradicalization and building resilience.

There are notable differences between Congolese and Ugandan clients, primarily due to variations in religious background, recruitment methods, roles within the group, and ideological exposure. Ugandan clients are more likely to come from radical Muslim families and are generally more familiar with ISCAP’s ideology, making them more deeply radicalized upon arrival at the camps. In contrast, many Congolese women have limited ideological knowledge, as they were forcibly captured and assigned low-status roles in the camps. As a result, they often revert to their original religious beliefs upon arriving at the center. Male Congolese clients, however, tend to have a moderate level of Islamic knowledge and rarely return to their previous religious beliefs, despite being free to do so. These differences highlight the need for context-specific deradicalization strategies: Ugandan clients may require more intensive ideological interventions, whereas Congolese clients—particularly women—may benefit more from psychological and social reintegration support.

A significant distinction also exists between clients who were originally Muslim and those who converted to Islam in the camps. Clients from Muslim backgrounds tend to be more ideologically committed due to deep familial and historical connections to ISCAP. In contrast, converts are introduced to the ideology only after reaching the jungles, where they undergo indoctrination. Many Congolese women who converted to Islam in the camps are often less radicalized than those born into the faith, and most revert to their original religious beliefs upon arrival at the center. This suggests that ideological commitment among converts is often more situational, learned under duress, and less deeply ingrained, making them more receptive to deradicalization efforts.

Notably, only 7% of the clients understand Arabic, the language of Islamic texts. This highlights the limited ability of ISCAP members to engage with Islam’s primary sources, suggesting a superficial or second-hand grasp of religious doctrines. This finding aligns with broader research on ISCAP and other violent extremist groups, which consistently shows that many recruits – and even some commanders – have a poor understanding of Islamic teachings (UNDP, 2017, 2023). Extremist organizations exploit this lack of knowledge, using distorted interpretations to radicalize individuals who may lack the ability to critically assess religious arguments.

Challenges and Lessons Learned from the DSC Department

As explained above, ASH’s deradicalization curriculum aims to address extremist ideologies through theological engagement and critical reflection. Although these are delivered through dialogic and non-coercive means, there is an inherent risk that such interventions may be perceived—by participants or external actors—as forms of ideological “re-education.” This underscores the need for careful ethical scrutiny and ongoing discussion of best practices to ensure respect for clients’ belief systems while advancing deradicalization goals.

One of the clearest signs of progress at ASH has been the transformation in clients’ attitudes toward non-Muslims. At intake, some individuals expressed hostility or refused to engage with anyone outside their faith. But over time, through shared meals, discussions, and everyday interactions, many began to show openness and respect for religious differences. Clients who once resisted contact with non-Muslims began eating, playing, and conversing with them—and, crucially, affirming their right to worship freely. This shift not only reflects deep personal change but also offers strong evidence that ASH’s deradicalization approach fosters genuine inclusivity and tolerance.

A second lesson emerged from clients’ religious resilience. Contrary to common assumptions, not all those exposed to ISCAP’s ideology fully internalized it. Some clients—especially those abducted—secretly held onto their Christian faith even after years in captivity, revealing their true beliefs once they felt safe at ASH. Others, lured into the group with promises of jobs or education, resisted its theological narratives throughout their involvement. In some cases, even those who initially claimed conversion after arriving at

ASH revealed their actual beliefs after building trust with staff. These stories underscore the critical need for safe, nonjudgmental spaces where clients can express and explore their identities without fear.

ASH continually updates its curriculum to address real-time questions and misconceptions that arise during sessions. This adaptive approach ensures the program remains responsive and relevant, particularly for recent defectors confronting ISCAP's shifting ideological narratives. It also allows ASH to incorporate and respond to newly introduced concepts, theological claims, or references that ISCAP develops or modifies in light of evolving circumstances—elements that may not yet be reflected in the standard curriculum.

Family background also plays a significant role in the radicalization process. Many Ugandan clients came from families with histories of extremist involvement, and some were even recruited by relatives. These cases highlight the importance of including family-focused interventions to break cycles of radicalization and support long-term behavioral change.

Finally, the program has learned that some individuals—such as former ISCAP commanders or those from deeply radicalized families—require additional, customized support. These clients often retain elements of extremist thinking and need prolonged, specialized interventions. Even after formal graduation, ASH continues to offer them psychosocial and spiritual care to ensure their safe reintegration and reduce the risk of relapse.

Reintegration and Livelihood Support

ASH plays a pivotal role in preparing clients for a successful transition back into civilian life by equipping them with livelihood skills, livelihood grant and providing robust post-reintegration support. This department addresses the socio-economic drivers of clients' recruitment and radicalization by offering context-specific, gender-sensitive, age-appropriate, and community-relevant skills that serve as economic alternatives to the promises made by groups like ISCAP. Beyond economic empowerment, these activities aim to engage clients productively, fostering a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, strengthening their social reintegration and demonstrating their value to society.

In-Center Training

The skills training program includes in-center activities and post-reintegration support. In-center activities focus on building practical and entrepreneurial skills that can be immediately applied upon reintegration and include vocational training, financial literacy, and education, as well as civic education, life skills, and family relations training. ASH also provides vocational skills training, including auto mechanics, tailoring, cobbling, soap making, and weaving, that is tailored to clients' preferences, community needs, and market demand.

Clients are encouraged and supported to pursue further skills development in their chosen trade after reintegration. Working with local officials, organizations, and families, ASH helps clients select viable business ideas, manage their earnings, provide customer care, and practice essential financial habits, including saving, spending, and borrowing. Creative methods such as role plays, simulations, and games reinforce these skills, fostering financial sustainability and long-term success.

Post-reintegration Support

Post-reintegration support provides clients with livelihood opportunities and ongoing mentorship and social services, including a small livelihood grant. The grant can be used for a variety of purposes, including further vocational training, start-up capital for a business, school enrollment, or ongoing medical and psychosocial care for clients who require long-term support.

To ensure the proper and productive use of these funds, ASH's field staff release them in installments while monitoring progress and working closely with family members, local leaders, faith leaders, and local social service providers to establish a strong network of accountability and support.

Reintegration and Livelihood Support Outcomes

While comprehensive post-integration assessments are still ongoing and will be addressed in a future paper, the livelihood support interventions have already had a transformative impact on clients. Many have been able to sustain small businesses, while

others have achieved long-held aspirations, such as securing employment as motorcycle mechanics or pursuing studies to become religious leaders.

All 86 Ugandan clients that graduated from ASH have received livelihood support: approximately 43% have ventured into business activities 24% have enrolled in primary or secondary school; 21% are pursuing vocational training; approximately 11% have been provided with essential basic needs; and 2% have received medical support to help them sustain their livelihoods.

Of the 102 Congolese clients sponsored under the ASH program, 28% have returned to school or started their formal education; about 26% are currently undergoing vocational training; and 45% are in the process of starting their own businesses. All the Tanzanian, Rwandan, and Burundian clients have been similarly supported.

Challenges and Lessons Learned from the RLS Department

A central lesson from ASH's reintegration efforts is the importance of engaging families and communities early in the process. Reintegration doesn't begin the moment clients return home—it starts well before. In areas in Uganda known for high recruitment or in DRC communities frequently targeted by ISCAP, ASH staff and partners work to educate local leaders and families about the rehabilitation journey. These conversations help reduce suspicion and stigma. In some cases, economic support is extended to communities through livelihood grants and training to ease tensions and promote peaceful coexistence. Without this groundwork, communities may resist reintegration, putting both the client and community at risk.

ASH also learned the need to prepare clients for life beyond the program. The center provides quality food, medical care, and accommodation—conditions often much better than what clients will encounter back home. Early on, this contrast created disappointment and difficulty for returning clients. In response, ASH began intentionally managing expectations by helping clients anticipate the realities of their home environments. This preparation has noticeably improved transitions and reintegration outcomes.

Another critical insight involves family connection. In the final month, clients are supported through contact with their families via shared photos and video calls. This simple act builds trust and significantly reduces anxiety, especially for those who haven't seen or

spoken to their families in years. For Congolese clients in earlier cohorts, the absence of such contact led to high levels of stress. With better logistical planning and tech access, this issue has largely been resolved, resulting in smoother transitions.

Recognizing that reintegration can trigger psychological distress, ASH now involves its MHPSS and DSC teams early in the reintegration phase. Counselors and imams prepare clients for challenges ahead and travel home with them, holding sessions with families to ease the adjustment. Follow-up continues through calls and home visits, giving clients and their families ongoing support when it's needed most.

Finally, ASH has observed the value of informal peer networks. Many clients remain in contact after leaving the program, forming support groups that encourage resilience and accountability. These networks offer a sense of community and solidarity during a difficult life transition. While monitoring is needed to prevent negative influences, peer support has proven to be a quiet but powerful asset in the reintegration process.

Al Shifa Home Clients Actively Fighting ISCAP

A core objective of ASH's approach is not only the successful rehabilitation of former ISCAP combatants but also their active participation in defection messaging. True success is measured by the willingness of reintegrated individuals to use their voices and personal stories against the group. This must be a central focus—rehabilitation is not just an endpoint but a strategic tool in undermining violent extremist group's cohesion and recruitment. By ensuring that defectors become credible messengers, ASH strengthens the long-term impact of DDR efforts.

The underlying theory of change is that successfully reintegrated individuals provide the most powerful and persuasive defection messaging. No ideological argument or fear-based deterrent is as effective as the lived example of a former combatant who has safely exited a violent extremist group, regained their freedom, and is having their basic needs met. Seeing a former comrade thrive outside the group directly challenges ISCAP's propaganda and creates a compelling incentive for those still inside to defect. This type of messaging—rooted in real-life transformation—outperforms traditional counter-narratives by offering tangible proof that leaving is not only possible but beneficial.

For this strategy to succeed, ASH prioritizes the long-term well-being of reintegrated individuals, ensuring they are supported, protected, and given platforms to share their experiences. By amplifying these stories through targeted defection campaigns, ASH disrupts ISCAP's grip on its members and weakens its ability to replenish its ranks. Reintegration, therefore, is not just a humanitarian goal but a critical component of further dismantling the group from within. Through integrating rehabilitation and defection messaging, ASH ensures that defectors are not merely recipients of aid but active agents of change in the fight against violent extremism.

Some experts and scholars posit that the ultimate indicator of successful deradicalization is when individuals not only disengage from their former extremist groups but also actively work against them. For instance, Horgan (2014) has highlighted the transformative potential of former extremists becoming vocal critics or taking an active role in preventing radicalization and violence. Such engagement reflects a deep cognitive and behavioral shift that can inspire others to leave similar groups. However, it is important to emphasize that former violent extremists do not need to actively work against their former groups to be considered deradicalized. Many factors, such as fear of retaliation, concerns for family safety, or personal preferences, may prevent active participation in such efforts.

Even so, the ASH program has achieved notable results in this area. Approximately 33% of ASH clients have actively contributed to efforts against ISCAP. This includes around 50 clients who voluntarily provided additional information to Ugandan authorities during or after their time at ASH. Significantly, this information was shared at a time when the clients were not under interrogation or investigation, underscoring the voluntary nature of their contributions. One client participated in the Bridgeway Foundation's film *Nur*, which aims to sensitize communities against ISCAP and promote acceptance of defectors. While only this client was offered this opportunity, Cohorts 2 and 3 produced and performed a drama during their graduation ceremonies, organized by the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs in Uganda. These performances highlighted their negative experiences within ISCAP and the benefits they gained from defecting and engaging with ASH's program.

Additionally, 50 clients, including about half of those who volunteered information, participated in Bridgeway Foundation's defection messaging project. Those who volunteer can have their pictures taken and/or record audio messages, which are then transmitted back

into the ISCAP camps with a call to camp members to peacefully surrender. ISCAP leadership discourages its members from trying to escape by threatening them that their families and communities will reject them and likely kill or torture them for what they have done if they try to return home. Defection messages powerfully counteract this narrative by proving to those who are still in the bush that their former friends and colleagues are alive and well, back home with their families or at school.

The clients' participation in these activities, which is always done with full consent, is significant not only for their desire to bring others out of the group, but also for their willingness to assume a personal risk to achieve that goal. While ISCAP's ability to perpetrate targeted attacks has diminished over the last couple of years as it has been pursued by a joint Congolese-Ugandan military operation, the group has been known in the past for its retributive killings and targeted assassinations. Clients who choose to participate are aware that they are identifying themselves to ISCAP leaders as so-called traitors who are actively trying to dismantle the group. While Bridgeway Foundation is careful to work with clients so that there are no details in the messages that would indicate where the clients are, clients are made aware that we are unable to guarantee their safety. Even so, many of them still choose to participate.

This level of engagement demonstrates the significant impact of ASH's programs in fostering both disengagement from extremism and active contributions to counter-extremism initiatives.

Recidivism and Lessons Learned

Among the 194 clients served by ASH, two cases of recidivism have been recorded (a recidivism rate of 1.03%). To err on the side of caution, ASH adopts a broad definition of recidivism to include clients who disengage from the program or disappear, even in the absence of concrete evidence of their return to ISCAP or involvement in insurgent or criminal activities. These incidents have provided ASH with valuable insights and lessons applicable to other rehabilitation contexts. For confidentiality and safety reasons, the clients will be referred to as Alimu and Ruth.

Alimu was referred to ASH in September 2023. After completing the rehabilitation program, he was resettled in the Kasese District of western Uganda, where he continued his tailoring training. Since his family could not be traced, ASH rented a room for him and paired him with a local youth mentor. However, in February 2024, Alimu stopped communicating with his mentor, sold the belongings provided by ASH, and disappeared. A month later, he was arrested with a suspected female ISCAP collaborator. Despite additional counseling and

enrollment in a controlled vocational school, he relapsed into drug abuse, theft, and violence. As a result, ASH referred him back to the UPDF in November 2024.

Ruth was admitted in November 2022 after being referred by the Amnesty Commission of Uganda. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she received treatment and counseling. Efforts to locate her family were unsuccessful, as all identified relatives denied any connection to her. On 29 March 2023, while other clients were preparing for reintegration, Ruth fled from the center through an unauthorized exit. A missing person report was filed, and Ruth was later found at her family home in Kampala. ASH facilitated her admission to a government mental health facility. However, by December 2024, she was no longer a registered patient, and the circumstances of her discharge remain unclear.

One of the main challenges in both Alimu and Ruth's cases was the absence of family support. Family connections typically provide a sense of belonging, stability, and emotional support, all of which are crucial for successful reintegration. Without these ties, individuals are more vulnerable to isolation and at greater risk of returning to extremist or criminal activities. This highlights the importance of establishing alternative support mechanisms for clients without family networks. Options such as mentorship, integration into community groups, or the creation of family-like connections can help fill this gap. When direct family support is unavailable, structured alternatives—such as placement within extended families, foster or surrogate families, or community-based support systems—must be put in place. The effectiveness of these arrangements depends on their stability and ability to provide long-term emotional and practical support.

Another crucial lesson is the need for continuous engagement and structured follow-ups with reintegrated individuals. Maintaining open lines of communication with clients, their families, and host communities enables early detection of potential issues. In Alimu's case, ASH's monitoring efforts helped identify his disappearance early, allowing for swift intervention. While Ruth's departure may not have been preventable, continuous engagement could have created opportunities for earlier intervention. This underscores the need for a systematic follow-up framework that involves families, community members, and local authorities in monitoring and supporting rehabilitated individuals.

Finally, the first few months after reintegration are a critical period when returnees are most vulnerable. They often face stigma, economic difficulties, and emotional distress,

increasing their risk of relapse. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to provide structured post-reintegration support, including regular check-ins, early warning mechanisms, and rapid response strategies. Strengthening these elements can significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism and help individuals build stable and secure futures.

Conclusion

ASH provides a comprehensive and valuable model for the rehabilitation, deradicalization, and reintegration of former violent extremists. The program's multifaceted approach combines psychological, ideological, social, and economic interventions, offering a holistic solution that can be adapted for diverse settings.

ASH's well-organized and structured rehabilitation efforts have yielded significant results. Most participants show a reduction in violent behavior and in PTSD and other psychological symptoms, and are successfully reintegrated into society, acquiring new skills and maintaining stable livelihoods. Once home, only 1% are known to have tried to return to their former extremist or criminal ways, while almost 33% have actively worked to weaken the extremist group to which they once belonged.

A key lesson from ASH is that successful rehabilitation of former violent extremists demands a holistic, multi-dimensional approach that integrates mental health and psychosocial support with deradicalization and spiritual counseling, vocational training and livelihood support, and access to healthcare. ASH's model equips clients with the tools for emotional resilience, ideological disengagement, financial independence, and long-term reintegration away from violent extremism.

Through building trust; employing tailored, adaptive, and culturally sensitive strategies and curriculum; targeting violent behavior and its ideological justification; and engaging in on-going support and relationships with reintegrated clients, their families, and their communities and faith groups, ASH helps former ISIS combatants and captives to build stable, independent, and purposeful lives beyond extremism.

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