START Seminar: Disengagement and Deradicalization from Terrorism

College Park, MD – Disengagement and Deradicalization from Terrorism. Are they possible? Are they the same?

Dr. John Horgan, the Director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Penn State, examined these questions in the context of their processes for a crowd of 80 at the University of Maryland on April 15, 2008.

Horgan’s presentation, “Disengagement and Deradicalization” was the most recent event in the START Seminar Series, a START initiative to bring leading experts in the field of homeland security to speak at the University of Maryland Campus.

In the Crist Boardroom of the Riggs Alumni Center, Horgan led with a large group session. He emphasized the importance of terminology in the study of disengagement and deradicalization, noting strong differences between the two terms. Horgan prefers the term “disengagement” because it does not necessarily imply leaving the terrorist movement. ‘Disengagement’ he argues, captures the complexity of the process for the individual terrorist and recognizes that individuals within terrorist movements constantly migrate between different roles and functions.

In fact, Horgan has found that disengagement rarely results from a total break from the movement. The nature of both the pathways and possibilities of leaving varies greatly by the individual’s role within the movement and the experience of disengaging can be either voluntary or involuntary. In addition, Horgan has found that an individual’s experience of disengagement can often be as gradual their experiences of initially becoming involved in the movement in the first place.

Horgan’s conclusions are based on years of fieldwork and study of terrorist movements. For his latest research project, he has so far personally interviewed 28 former terrorists from 13 different movements.
In these interviews, he has discovered striking parallels between the IRA and terrorist groups more active today. They have similarities across all three levels that Horgan studies; how individuals became involved in the movement, how they stayed involved, and how they disengaged. Most notably, in almost every group he has noticed a mismatch in the perceptions of former terrorists between the reasons they became involved in the movement and the reality of what their involvement subsequently entailed.

In conclusion of the main session, Horgan stressed that we need a more sophisticated idea of what disengagement involves, as well as a more realistic sense of what is possible with current attempts to promote deradicalization. Horgan left the audience with a question: if we can successfully promote and facilitate disengagement from terrorist activity, does deradicalization really matter?

### Student Session

Following the large group session, Horgan led a more informal session with a small group of Maryland students, the majority of which are enrolled in the START Terrorism Studies Minor Program (http://www.start.umd.edu/education/undergraduate_minor/). In this group, the students were able to ask him more detailed questions on the process of his fieldwork. With many of them intending to study terrorism and homeland security, they gained valuable advice on the process of fieldwork, which some plan to utilize in their future careers.