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De-radicalisation of Terrorists: Theoretical Analysis and Case Studies

Md. Didarul Islam

Synopsis

This article argues that terrorists can be de-radicalised through holistic approaches that focus on a diverse range of factors, including disengagement and reintegration. While narrowing on individual focused de-radicalisation instead of group de-radicalisation programmes, definitional considerations and theoretical models are discussed. Through observations of programmes in Yemen, Pakistan, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, the author proposes a three-tiered de-radicalisation model: (i) re-education and ideological intervention, (ii) vocational training and financial support, (iii) and viable environment for reintegration.

Introduction

Individual focused de-radicalisation programmes attempt to reduce the amount of violence in a society by two means: redirecting the motives of a terrorist and facilitating his/her reintegration into the society.¹ De-radicalisation is a relatively new strategy, with specific programmes leading to varying degrees of success and failure. The first de-radicalisation programme was introduced in Yemen in 2002 and was closely followed by programmes in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia. In some cases, de-radicalisation programmes have been successful in ensuring that terrorists denounce violence, while in other scenarios recidivism has occurred.² Specific failures do not discount the importance of de-radicalisation as a means to combat violent extremism in different local

contexts. Overall, this article provides a definitional analysis of de-radicalisation, critical analysis of theoretical models, and an evaluation of de-radicalisation programmes in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia, promoting the need for a holistic approach.

De-radicalisation: Definitions

The lack of consensus in defining radicalisation and violent extremism also extends to de-radicalisation with differing conceptualisations and theoretical models. Broadly, de-radicalisation can be understood as the process of changing one's internal beliefs and denouncing radical ideologies. John Horgan defines de-radicalisation as: "the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalisation is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity". In comparison, some scholars have defined de-radicalisation as the process of changing an individual's beliefs and embracing mainstream values by rejecting radical or violence-oriented ideologies.³ In this case, a de-radicalised person will not only cease to provide physical support for a terrorist group, but also will abandon sympathy for said group.⁴ Omar Ashour defines part of de-radicalisation as gradually accepting pluralist societal, political and economic discourse.⁵

De-radicalisation can be group-focused, where a large number of terrorists in a specific

¹ Peter Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries," *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 2010, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Prisons-and-terrorism-15-countries.pdf>.

² Leigh Striegher, "The Deradicalisation of Terrorists," *Salus journal* 1, no.1. (2013): 29.

³ A. Rabasa et al., *De-radicalising Islamist Extremist*, (California: National Security Research Division,

2010), xiii.

⁴ John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalisation Programmes," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no.2, (2010): 267-291.

⁵ Omar Ashour, "Online De-Radicalisation? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no.6 (2010): 5-6.

group are targeted to denounce their violent ideology. This category of de-radicalisation is only possible in a group with a highly authoritarian leadership. In this case, the active participation of the group leader in de-radicalisation programmes is key. Algeria and Egypt implemented such a programme but the success rate was not high as it focused on ideological transformation while financial assistance, while overlooking vocational training among other important variables.⁶ On the other hand, individual-focused de-radicalisation programmes are designed based on local contexts with no-one-size-fits-all policy regardless of the terrorist organisation the individual belongs to.

Theoretical Models of De-Radicalisation

Bertram argues that there is no standardised framework for de-radicalisation programs⁷ and there are a broad range of proposed models available for effective de-radicalisation. In terms of individual focused de-radicalisation programmes, there is a broad understanding that they should be based on individuals' perspectives, beliefs and motivations for joining a terrorist group or engaging in violence. As such, a successful de-radicalisation initiative would be premised on active endeavours to alter an individual's radical beliefs. This does not only reflect a change of behaviour, but a shift in perspectives and ideologies.⁸ In this case, de-radicalisation programmes must be designed based on the nature of an extremist. For instance, a former radical who left his organisation by choice should be in a different programme than one who was radicalised and then detained by the authorities.

De-radicalisation versus Disengagement

Striegheer's model focuses on two phases of de-radicalisation⁹: (i) preventing a radical from engaging in further violence or what John

Horgan calls 'disengagement' (ii) and altering the ideology of the radical.¹⁰ He maintains that the former is easier than the latter as it is difficult to change an individual's belief system and ideology. Disengagement is the cessation of active and physical action of a radical. A radical can still be disengaged without denouncing radical beliefs.¹¹ According to Striegheer, disengagement is more important because it serves as the foundation to de-radicalise terrorists.¹² In comparison, Horgan does not consider disengagement as an integral part of de-radicalisation. He argued that there is no guarantee that a successful disengagement programme will lead to de-radicalisation. A terrorist disengaged from violent activities does not necessarily mean that the terrorist has denounced his or her extremist beliefs entirely.¹³

Even though disengagement plays a vital role in de-radicalisation, there is a significant possibility of recidivism without a holistic de-radicalisation process. Recidivism might include the individual re-joining the same or any other terrorist group or engaging in any other violent crimes. In this sense, de-radicalisation is more difficult than disengagement.¹⁴ Some scholars posit that it remains easier to convince an individual not to engage in violence, but more complicated to disassociate them from their group's specific ideology and related commitments based on what they have been taught by the leadership or fellow members.¹⁵

Specific Approaches for Effective De-Radicalisation

De-radicalisation programmes that focus on residential camps or prisons play a significant role in the models of various scholars. Rana proposed a four-dimensional de-radicalisation approach which focused on security, ideology,

⁶ Mostafizur Rahman, *Islamist Radicalisation: Actors, Drivers and Approaches* (Dhaka: Srabon Publications, 2018), 216-217.

⁷ Luke Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?" *Journal for Deradicalisation* 5 (2015):121-122.

⁸ A. Rabasa et al., *De-radicalising Islamist Extremist*, 6.

⁹ Striegheer, "The De-radicalisation of Terrorists," 20.

¹⁰ John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist* (New York: Routledge, 2009),152.

¹¹ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 122.

¹² Striegheer, "The De-radicalisation of Terrorists", 21.

¹³ John Horgan, "De-radicalisation or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation: Perspectives on Terrorism", *A Journal of the Terrorism Research Initiative* 2, no.4 (2008).

¹⁴ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 123.

¹⁵ Rabasa, *De-radicalising Islamist Extremist*.

society and politics.¹⁶ The security approach states that threats posed by arrested detainees would be reduced if they are taken care of in a rehabilitation centre. In contrast, the ideological approach centres on religious clerics who will actively engage with detainees and promote peace. The societal perspective, on the other hand, will engage with those who are vulnerable towards extremism and those radicalised to promote moderation. Lastly, the political approach includes the workings of the society to improve the socio-economic atmosphere, in order to win the hearts of the terrorists.¹⁷ While the first three approaches can be implemented in detention with a higher possibility of success, the political approach remains difficult to implement and measure. Any political shifts that promote peace, stability and co-existence are long-term in nature and cannot be achieved overnight.

On the contrary, Rabasa advocates for the Dual Focus approach, where de-radicalisation programmes would centre on the interplay between radicals and Islamic scholars. Used mainly for the terrorists who were inspired by Islamist extremism, this approach creates opportunities for Islamic scholars to have discussions with the individuals that focus on the inconsistencies and manipulations of religious teachings. Through these discussions, the scholars build on counter-narratives based on their beliefs and convictions for being radicalised. Sageman also argues that by directly challenging the validity of radical teachings and beliefs, it would be more effective approach to de-radicalise an individual.¹⁹ This Dual Focus approach can be incorporated in rehabilitation programmes during detentions in prison.

¹⁶ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Swat De-radicalisation Model: Prospects for Rehabilitating Militants," *Conflict and Peace Studies* 4, no.2, (2011): 1.

¹⁷ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 125.

¹⁸ Rabasa et al., *De-radicalising Islamist Extremist*.

¹⁹ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks In The Twenty First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

²⁰ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 128-129.

²¹ Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *The Hague: International*

Role of Counter-Narratives

Counter-narratives can play a major role in de-radicalisation programmes. Bertram emphasised on counter-narratives for de-radicalisation programmes to focus on the hypocrisies of the radical group leaders who manipulate religion for their gains, as well as former radicals who denounced violence and terrorism.²⁰ Similarly, Briggs and Feve confirm that counter-terrorism narratives can play a significant role in mobilising public opinion against radicals. In this case, the Internet can be an effective measure in broader efforts to counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation efforts through active counter-narrative campaigns. This would include removing online extremist contents and limiting the consumption and production of such materials. Such policies could reduce the appeal of terrorist content to those who could be radicalised and who have successfully gone through de-radicalisation programmes.²¹

As a proponent of the anti-force strategy, Kruglanski argues that de-radicalisation programmes should be based in residential camps to directly promote counter-narrative teachings.²² Supporting this view, Bertam argued that de-radicalisation cannot be achieved only by force as it could result in resistance from the extremists.²³

Local Context and Holistic Approaches

Scholars have highlighted that for an individual-focused de-radicalisation programme a holistic approach is required.²⁴ Neumann argues that one de-radicalisation programme cannot be applied to all radicals as there are different local contexts, perspectives and reasons for joining a terrorist

Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>.

²² Arie Kruglanski, Michele Gelfand and Rohan Gunaratna, "Aspects of De-radicalisation," *Institute for the Study of Asymmetric Conflict*, 2015, <http://www.asymmetricconflict.org/articles/aspects-of-deradicalization/>.

²³ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 131.

²⁴ Mostafizur Rahman, *Islamist Radicalisation: Actors, Drivers and Approaches*, 216-217.

group.²⁵ As such, models would differ based on local contexts and the individuals they focus on.²⁶ A holistic approach can produce significant long-term success when it is incorporated with ideological conversion, vocational training, financial assistance and security.

Push factors and pull factors should be accounted for in a holistic approach.²⁷ In terms of push factors, a terrorist becomes demoralised and loses faith in the group due to the goals and methodology of the group, the act of killing of civilian, and a lack of social interaction and its resulting uncertainty. On the other hand, pull factors point to an assurance of a new beginning for the terrorists that different opportunities and incentives such as reduced detention and imprisonment, financial support, vocational training and assistance in transiting into mainstream society. Understanding the dynamics of these factors would allow states to formulate and implement more tailored and specific de-radicalisation programmes.

In addition, one-to-one interaction, as pointed out by Stern and Porges, forms a key ingredient in holistic de-radicalisation programmes.²⁸ This is because interaction helps to identify the violence-oriented beliefs and perspectives. However, one-to-one de-radicalisation programmes are time-consuming to implement and requires significant resources. Other scholars have argued that terrorists should be given financial assistance through loans or jobs so that instances of re-engaging with terrorist groups can be reduced. This layer of social integration still remains a major challenge as former terrorists tend to feel isolated and are therefore not accepted by their communities.

²⁵ Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and Deradicalisation in 15 Countries," 57.

²⁶ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?," 124.

²⁷ Striegner, "The Deradicalisation of Terrorists," 22-25; Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and Deradicalisation in 15 Countries," 48.

²⁸ Jessica Stern and Marisa Porges, "Getting De-radicalisation Right," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-05-01/getting-deradicalization-right>.

Case Studies

Yemen

Following Al-Qaeda's (AQ) attacks on American and French interests in Yemen, the first institutionalised de-radicalisation programme, "Committee for Dialogue" was initiated in 2002. Largely focused on re-educating prison detainees, its approach was to change the radical ideological beliefs of 360 radicals.²⁹

The individual focused de-radicalisation programme only experienced partial successes and was subsequently shut down in 2005. According to Porges, even though the programme paved the way for other countries to adopt similar measures³⁰, it was partially successful as there were only a small number of extremists who were finally reintegrated. Therefore, this programme was not a poster example of de-radicalisation. Porges maintained that the government's lack of commitment and the absence holistic approaches resulted in a discontinuation of the programme in 2005.³¹

One of the factors that could have contributed to its limited success was that the authorities did not possess sufficient data on the number of detainees who had been successfully de-radicalised. As such, this ad hoc approach lacked credibility and a significant number of detainees returned to violence.³² Another contributing factor, according to Rahman, was that as the Yemeni model was based on ideological re-education, the officials could not liaise and attract religious leaders who could be involved.

Pakistan

In contrast, the endeavour of the Pakistani government to undertake a holistic approach in its Swat Valley De-Radicalisation model

²⁹ Marisa Porges, "De-radicalisation, the Yemeni Way," *Survival* 52, no.2 (2010): 27-35.

³⁰ Horgan, "De-radicalisation or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation: Perspectives on Terrorism," 7.

³¹ Porges, "De-radicalisation, the Yemeni Way," 28-29.

³² Striegner, "The De-radicalisation of Terrorists," 19-40.

contributed to the success of its programme.³³ Introduced in 2009, the programme provided 2,500 radicals with vocational training, financial assistance and interest-free loans. These efforts were intended to serve as motivation for ideological shifts and to counter the extremist teachings of terrorist groups.³⁴

Although Bertram could not provide sufficient data to confirm that this model had a high success rate, the programme had not only de-radicalised the terrorists, but also significantly challenged the recruitment of youth in Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Unlike other Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia and Indonesia in particular), research has highlighted that Pakistan has a complex militant landscape coupled with little support from the former radicals in the de-radicalisation programme to motivate the extremists to move away from violence.³⁵ The Swat Valley Model also lacked financial support and political commitment and was therefore not implemented nationwide, which contributed to its shortcomings and transient nature. Similar to the Yemeni example, this programme lacked credible Pakistani religious leaders who could play a vital role in de-radicalising the terrorists.³⁶

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia initiated a holistic de-radicalisation programme based on the need for individual's ideological shift from violence to non-violence in 2004. The Saudi programme mainly incorporated three aspects: ideological changes, vocational training and financial support, and ensuring security of the former radicals.³⁷

Under ideological intervention and vocational training, the programme provided peaceful teachings of Islam, motivation to give up the extremist ideology they hold strong to, and conducted religious dialogue. Specifically, the Saudi Arabian model of counter-narratives includes media campaign, national dialogue, disrupting the task of the extremists, national solidarity campaign, sponsored publications against radical teachings and online filtering.³⁸ In addition, financial support was provided to family members of detainees.³⁹ As a result, a strong relationship was eventually developed between the programme officials and the detainees aided by psychologists, teachers and security officials.⁴⁰

While Yemen mainly concentrated on ideological alteration, Saudi Arabia focused on behavioural change along with ideological change. Initially, the Saudi authorities claimed that the programme had a 100 percent success rate, but later confirmed that at least 10 to 20 percent of the former detainees went back to violence.⁴¹ Even though this programme was not primarily institutionalised, it was still a holistic effort to reintegrate terrorist detainees into mainstream society.⁴²

Indonesia

Indonesia's de-radicalisation programme was a disengagement initiative that focused on terrorists who were detained by the police.⁴³ The objective of the programme was to slow down terrorist recruitment in the long-term. From 2005 to 2007, the first phase of this programme was an active endeavour by the government to disengage terrorists from

³³ Bertram, "How Could a Terrorist be De-Radicalised?", 133.

³⁴ Zubair Azam and Sayeda Fatima, "Mishal: A Case Study Of A De-radicalisation And Emancipation Program In Swat Valley, Pakistan," *Journal of De-radicalisation*, no.11 (2017): 1.

³⁵ Rana, "Swat De-radicalisation Model: Prospects for Rehabilitating Militants," 2.

³⁶ Azam and Fatima, "Mishal: A Case Study of a de-radicalisation And Emancipation Program In Swat Valley, Pakistan," 1.

³⁷ Andreas Casptack, "De-radicalisation Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study," *Middle East Institute*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deradicalization-programs-saudi-arabia-case-study>.

³⁸ Hussein Solomon, "Combating Islamist radicalisation in South Africa," *African Security Review* 23, no.1 (2014): 27.

³⁹ John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalisation Programs," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no.2 (2010): 278.

⁴⁰ A. Rabasa et al., *De-radicalising Islamist Extremist*, 115.

⁴¹ Horgan and Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs," 278.

⁴² Striegner, "The De-radicalisation of Terrorists," 32.

⁴³ Horgan and Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs," 273.

violence.⁴⁴ Similar to Saudi Arabia's programme, Indonesia used a supportive approach towards detainees and provided financial and educational assistance, as well as allowed family members of the detainees to actively participate in it.⁴⁵

One significant feature was the inclusion of former radicals and militants to share their past experiences with the detainees. This feature, according to Horgan and Braddock, was a key factor that led to its success, where the tragic experiences shared by former militants are able to dissuade current extremists.⁴⁶

However, due to its lack of institutionalisation, irregular financial mechanisms and a lack of dedication by the officials, the success of the programme was limited. Striegher⁴⁷, for example, maintains that the partial failure of the programme was due to the lack of proper education on altering or countering extremist ideologies. As a result, the programme was targeted more towards 'disengagement' from violence rather than denouncing the ideology of terrorists. On the other hand, Rabasa et al⁴⁸ states that the programme has achieved notable success pertaining to disengagement in particular, despite its temporary nature .

Comparative Evaluation and Holistic Programmes

There are several important elements that help to determine if a de-radicalisation approach is 'holistic'. According to Neumann, these features include ideological and religious education, vocational training to facilitate societal reintegration in the mainstream society. A holistic approach would then focus on establishing networks distinct from former terrorist networks, encouraging associations with the family and community with a friendly atmosphere for the detainees to promote trust in the authorities.⁴⁹

Among the four de-radicalisation programmes, Yemen focused on changing the ideology of the radicals through re-education and religious dialogue by engaging

scholars. However, this programme was not holistic as it lacked efforts for reintegration by providing vocational training and financial assistance to the extremists. Pakistan's Swat Valley model adopted more holistic approaches that included re-education, vocational training and partial financial assistance. But this programme could not be continued due to a lack of financial support with a segment of those de-radicalised also re-joining extremist groups. The Indonesian de-radicalisation programme conducted during 2005 to 2007 was mainly targeted towards disengagement instead of de-radicalisation. This approach was limited and focused on ideological shifts through religious teachings in prisons, but did not provide vocational training or financial support to allow effective reintegration.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia adopted a more holistic approach towards de-radicalisation despite cases of recidivism. They focused on three aspects, which included: (i) proper re-education for ideological shifts with the help of the religious scholars, (ii) vocational training on different skills for economic re-integration, (iii) and financial assistance to the radicals and their families. In addition, the Saudi Arabia programme did not face any financial hurdles, with officials ensuring the physical security of those de-radicalised as well. Even though the programmes in all four countries experienced cases of recidivism, the programme in Saudi Arabia showcased long-term effectiveness in terms of its approach that did not end at disengaging detainees from violence.

Recommendations

Through a theoretical and case studies-based discussion, it is evident that de-radicalisation programmes are likely to experience higher rates of success if a holistic approach is being adopted. There are three features of holistic individual de-radicalisation programmes that should be met.

Firstly, a detainee should be re-educated to shift from a violent to non-violent ideological

⁴⁴ Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries."

⁴⁵ J Horgan and Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs," 274.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴⁷ Striegher, "The De-radicalisation of Terrorists," 19-40.

⁴⁸ A. Rabasa et al., *De-radicalising Islamist Extremists*, 115.

⁴⁹ Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries."

perspective. In this remit, former terrorists and scholars should be roped in to share their personal experiences and moderate teachings with detainees, which have proven to be very effective. Besides former terrorists, family members of detainees can also be included in this programme to further enhance its effectiveness. Secondly, vocational training should be given detainees to help them achieve financial independence. In addition to that, states need to provide financial support and loans to build trust between the detainee and authorities. Thirdly, a terrorist should be given a viable environment to reintegrate back into the society. There would be a significant chance of reengagement in violence if the individual feels isolated. Along with the creation of a viable environment for a de-radicalised individual, it is important to ensure his or her security as well. Former terrorists should therefore be given 'post de-radicalised security' by state security agencies, as they might face security threats from their former terrorist group.

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