

# Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World

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Deradicalization, as we know it today, first emerged in the Arab world in the late 20th century. In particular, it emerged in Egypt and Algeria<sup>2</sup> before later spreading to other countries and regions of the world, including Europe and Asia. According to a survey conducted by the author for the United Nations in 2009, at least 34 out of 192 UN Member States claimed to have some sort of deradicalization and/or counter-radicalization policies in place during the first decade of the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> Out of those 34 states, six were Arab states (Algeria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, UAE and Yemen), and, ironically, ten were European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK). Since then, the number of countries claiming to resort to deradicalization policies and measures has evolved. The new emphasis given to deradicalization was part of a larger effort by Member States to undermine appeal to violent extremism and limit the pool of potential recruits by terrorist organizations and groups. With regards to deradicalization, as opposed to counter-radicalization which seeks to counter the appeal of radical ideology in society, it

focuses on the prevention of radicalization and recruitment inside incarceration centres. The rise in the number of individuals arrested and charged with terrorist-related activities has increased apprehension about the possibility of turning prisons into a recruitment arena for the terrorist activities and turning incarceration centres into “universities of terrorism” or “universities of Jihadism.” Deradicalization, in theory, therefore seeks to prevent that through a battery of policies that seeks to provide religious rehabilitation for radical prisoners, to facilitate their reintegration back into society, and to create an environment conducive to such a process inside prisons.

However, despite the considerable attention deradicalization policies have received and continue to receive, they are still underresearched, not fully understood and remain controversial. Little is known about how they are being designed, implemented and practiced in the real world and “their effectiveness has not undergone independent scrutiny and its degree is largely a matter of opinion.”<sup>4</sup>

Due to time and space limitations, this paper will not only provide a background to the evolution of deradicalization programmes in recent years, but will also focus mainly on why they have not delivered what has been expected of them in terms of countering violent extremism (VE) and preventing prison radicalization. The former will be discussed in the next section, while the latter in section three. The final section outlines the author’s conclusions.

<sup>1</sup> All ideas and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author’s alone. Professor El-Said can be contacted at the following email: h.elsaid@mmu.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> ASHOUR, Omar. *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, London, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> COUNTERTERRORISM IMPLEMENTATION TASK FORCE. *First Report of the Working Group on Radicalisation and Extremism that Lead to Terrorism: Inventory of State Programmes*, UNCTITF, New York, P. 3, 2009. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=10129>

<sup>4</sup> KRUGLANSKI, Arie W.; GELFAND Michele J.; BÉLANGER, Jocelyn J. et al. “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” in *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Suppl. 1, 2014.

## Deradicalization in Perspective

Egypt and Algeria started such programmes in the late 1990s, albeit in different contexts, places and with different objectives. In Egypt, for example, the process was spontaneous, occurring from within and launched by the top brass of the movement's intellectual leadership, which had in the past provided justification for violence. It also started from inside the prison system. It began when the two then major Egyptian groups, *al-Gamma al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group or IG) and *al-Jihad Islami* (AJ) denounced violence and announced their repentance in 1997 and 2007, respectively. During the process, the leaders of the IG published no less than 25 volumes of exhortations to their followers inside and outside the wire in order to convince them to abandon violence.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the Egyptian government played little or no role in this process. Only when Egyptian security officials became convinced of the sincerity of the repentance process did they start to support and facilitate it among the group, by allowing its leaders to conduct a tour of prisons to convince other members to denounce violence on both moral and effectiveness grounds. The Algerian Reconciliation programme, on the other hand, started in the mountains, when more than 5,000 members of the Islamic Salvation Army (ISA), then the largest and most organized fighting group, accepted the reconciliation process after almost 10 years of "dirty war." During this period, key civil society organizations and community members played a crucial role in convincing the State and society to accept reconciliation, which was achieved in 1997.

While the Egyptian repentance process included ideological debate between the key ideologues of the IG and AJ, on the one hand, and members of various groups on the other, the Algerian Reconciliation process was devoid of any ideological debate. It was understood from the very beginning that the Algerian conflict was not over religion, but rather over politics.

Finally, both the Egyptian repentance and the Algerian Reconciliation processes were judged as "successful."<sup>6</sup> Although IG and AJ prisoners were

subsequently released into Egyptian society, not a single terrorist act has been committed by any individual associated with these two groups since 1997. The Algerian Reconciliation process also ended almost 10 years of "dirty war," during which time between 100-200,000 Algerians lost their lives. It also succeeded in decommissioning the weapons of more than 5,000 former fighters and allowed them to be reintegrated into society. Although some fighting continued, this no longer represented a major security threat to the Algerian State or society.

The first decade of the 21st century saw the emergence of three waves of the so-called deradicalization efforts, between 2002-2004, 2005-2010, and post 2010. Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia were the first to introduce such programmes under different titles. All, however, included extensive religious rehabilitation as a key component.

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During the third wave, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands were among the first European countries to experiment with deradicalization policies in 2005-2007. The last three countries to introduce such policies during this wave were Jordan, Kuwait and UAE around 2009-2010. The fourth, and final wave started around 2011, following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, which attracted a large number of Foreign Fighters (FFs), more than 30,000 from over 100 countries around the world. This took place mainly in Germany, with the introduction of the Hayat Programme in January 2012 and the expansion of the Aarhus Programme in the same year in order to accommodate FFs returning from Syria and/or would-be FFs planning on de-

<sup>5</sup> ASHOUR, 2009, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> KRUGLANSKI et al., op. cit, 2014, p. 85.

parting to Syria. It also witnessed the review and introduction of the second version of Prevent in the UK, following the disappointing outcomes of the previous phase.

## The Outcome of Deradicalization

Academics, researchers and even policymakers seem to have less confidence in most of the deradicalization efforts implemented since the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>7</sup> In fact, one is tempted to argue that they seem to have made things worse. For example, the Institute for Economics and Peace concluded in its latest 2016 report (p.14) that, despite seemingly large efforts to counter radicalization and introduce deradicalization policies, “there has been only a ten per cent decline in terrorism in 2015,” and “this decline was driven by reductions in Iraq and Nigeria” following the weakening of Boko Haram and ISIL in these countries in recent years.<sup>8</sup> More alarmingly, the decline in the level of terrorism in Iraq and Nigeria has been at the expense of a rise in terrorism in many formerly “moderately affected countries,” which have “experienced record levels of terrorism.” (p.2). Those formerly moderate countries include France, Belgium, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Germany, Sweden and the UK, following the Manchester May 2017 attacks. If Iraq and Nigeria are excluded, terrorism in “53 moderate countries has worsened,” especially in countries, which have experienced very “moderate” levels of terror attacks in the past. This includes many countries known for designing and implementing deradicalization programmes, as mentioned above.

Also, several individuals who were involved in some of the most brutal attacks in recent years in Europe and the Arab world have actually spent some time in prison before committing their terrorist acts. Some even attended and graduated from

some of these deradicalization programmes discussed earlier in this paper. According to one source, no less than a third of FFs in Syria and Iraq were well known to prison and security officials before departure.<sup>9</sup>

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Why have the outcomes of the so-called deradicalization policies been so disappointing in Europe and the Arab world? The next section attempts to shed light on the answer to these questions.

## What is Wrong with Deradicalization?

Time and space do not permit a thorough examination of each programme. Such an exercise has been carried out elsewhere, so as not to warrant repetition here. Suffice it to say that the literature distinguishes between two types of deradicalization programmes: explicit (or ideological) and implicit (non-ideological), or conservative and secular deradicalization. Over time, the differences between the two tapered to almost emerge as one factor: whether they believe ideology is the culprit or not. Secular deradicalization shows more interest in the behaviour of individuals and seeks to disengage individuals from violence, while accepting the fact that being radical in itself is not illicit. Explicit deradicalization, on the other hand, seeks to bring about a change in ideology (cognitive change), re-

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the outcomes of such programmes, see HANNAH, Greg; CLUTTERBUCK, Lindsay and RUBIN, Jennifer. *Radicalisation or Rehabilitation? Understanding the challenge of extremist and radicalized prisoners*, Rand Corporation, 2008. [www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2008/RAND\\_TR571.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2008/RAND_TR571.pdf), and EL-SAID, H. and HARRIGAN, J. *Deradicalizing Violent Extremists: Counter-radicalization and Deradicalization Programmes and Their Impact in Muslim Majority States*, Routledge, 2013, and EL-SAID, Hamed. *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS AND PEACE. *Global Terrorism Index 2016*, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, 2016. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> MEHRA, T. *Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), p. 8, The Hague, 2016. <https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-trends-dynamics-and-policy-responses/>

flecting its basic premise which views ideology as the main cause of radicalization. The argument here is that changing the behaviour of an individual requires changing his/her ideology that motivates that behaviour in the first place.

The debate over whether deradicalization should confine itself to the behavioural and/or the cognitive side remains contentious and unresolved. But deradicalization is not confined to ideological rehabilitation only. In addition to the ideological element, deradicalization policies generally experimented with a wide range of other components. These ranged from providing psychological support to vocational training and education, family rehabilitation, physical and sports programmes, art, and a post-release scheme to facilitate reintegration of released prisoners back into society. The latter also includes an additional battery of incentives, such as financial support, health insurance, assisting released individuals (graduates) finding jobs or return to education. Some even go as far as assisting the graduates in getting married.

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Not all programmes employ the entire battery of incentives or carry the same degree of extensiveness. The most extensive and sustained programme is the Saudi deradicalization programme, known as the Counselling Programme. It includes most of the elements discussed above. The least extensive is the Jordanian programme, which revolves around a

newly established and embryonic dialogue policy. Until the time of this writing, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon and Egypt have no deradicalization policies whatsoever. The rest of the programmes lie somewhere between the Saudi and Jordanian programmes.

Only the Algerian Reconciliation and Danish Aarhus policies can be described as secular or liberally oriented. Most other programmes in the Arab world and Europe are of the explicit type, the type that views ideology as the culprit and where everything revolves around ideological rehabilitation. It is here where the Achilles heel of these programmes lies. Sageman (2015)<sup>10</sup> argues that there is a knowledge gap. We still don't know what causes an individual to become a terrorist. He explains this stalemate in terms of a lack of cooperation between academics and researchers, which have the methodical rigour and skills to conduct sophisticated analysis but lack access to sensitive premises (like prison, prisoners or deradicalized individuals) and information on them which government security agencies possess. The upshot has been an "unbridgeable gap between academia and the intelligence community" on the one hand, and "an explosion of speculations with little empirical grounding in academia," on the other. One such assumption relates to the basic foundation of most explicit deradicalization programmes regarding the role of ideology.

Most European leaders and politicians seem to believe that ideology is the culprit. Rik Coolsaet (2016, p. 47) cites clear examples of statements made by several European leaders openly acknowledging the Islamic ideology as the number one cause of terrorism. From Cameron in London to Manuel Valls in Paris, to the Belgian Prime Minister, Charles Michel, to the ongoing vigorous public debate in the Netherlands on the relationship between Salafism and jihadism, they all endorse the same approach that goes along the following lines:

"The root cause of this threat to our security is quite clear. It is a poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism, which is condemned by all faiths and faith leaders."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> SAGEMAN, Marc. "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 26, Issue 4, pp. 565-80, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> COOLSAET, Rik. "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case." *Egmont Paper 81*, EGMONT Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016.

Equally, most Arab officials also believe the culprit is ideology. In fact, it was Arab officials who promoted the idea that “these individuals are simply misled, they misinterpreted the Islamic religion.”<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, most deradicalization policies in Europe and the Arab world start from the same premise: ideology is the culprit. This explains why religious and ideological rehabilitation is the most important and common component of most deradicalization policies.

However, the recent empirical evidence shows very clearly that this particular wave of terrorism, which was inspired and revived by the outbreak of conflict in Syria since 2011, is “even less influenced by religion or ideology” than any other wave in the past, that “it is not the narrative (i.e., the ideology) that eventually lures them into terrorism,” but that terrorists are rather influenced “more by personal motivations and motives.”<sup>13</sup> The role of ideology, known in some European official circles as the conveyor belt, has been declining over time since the 1980s. Tightly knit “social networks” that evolve more around social and personal ties replace ideology as the main conveyor belt.

It is a well-known and long-established fact in medical science that if the treatment is wrong, the disease will spread and the patient’s condition will worsen. The problem with treating ideology as the culprit in deradicalization policies, when it is not the root cause, is that not only does it fail to provide a proper solution to individuals who have already crossed the line and become radicalized enough to commit or attempt to commit a terrorist act, but it also fails to prevent others from following the same path. This is mainly because such an approach de-emphasizes and ignores the environment that breeds radicalization and extremism in the first place and fails to take into account the context where the kind of radicalization and extremism that could lead to terrorism is taking place. Deradicalization, in other words, is delinked from its own context and environment. It focuses only on the individual, the symptom, and not the disease, the root cause. It also pins the blame on individuals simply “misinterpreting the

Quran” and “misunderstanding Islam,” and absolves the State, state institutions and the environment where these groups and individuals live, grow up and try to thrive, rather unsuccessfully, from any responsibility.

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Moreover, given the fact that most information regarding the threat of VE and prison radicalization is monopolized by security apparatuses, there is a tendency to exaggerate the role and influence of deradicalization policies for obvious reasons. Most officials describe their deradicalization efforts as successful!<sup>14</sup> Although it is never clear what criteria this evaluation is based on.

Such a description is actually problematic for several reasons. First, most academics and researchers have access to neither incarceration centres, nor incarcerated or “deradicalized” individuals, which makes it very difficult to conduct an independent study on the effectiveness of such programmes. It is also problematic because most European and Arab states do not actually have fully fledged deradicalization programmes, but rather small processes and measures inside the prison system, evolving mostly around ideological debates and discussions, which they describe as deradicalization programmes.

It is a well-known fact that inmates arrested for terrorist-related charges in Western, including most European, countries are placed in individual cells for a very long time, sometimes without any activi-

<sup>12</sup> This observation is based on my many conversations with state officials and counter radicalization personnel during my regular visits to the Arab World over the past few years.

<sup>13</sup> COOLSAET, op. cit., 2016, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Again, I noticed this observation during my many conversations with state officials in the Arab World, Europe and Asia during my recent travels there.



ties whatsoever. The belief seems to be that since most of these individuals will be spending very long time in prison, 20-30 years if not life, why should we worry about deradicalizing them in the first place? Not surprising, many European countries do not have any deradicalization policies in place. France, Norway, Switzerland, Romania and Austria are among those countries.

The problem is not dissimilar in the Arab world, except it is ten times worse. Not only do countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Lebanon have no deradicalization policies whatsoever, but their prisoners are also incarcerated in largely overcrowded prisons with extremely poor living conditions, characterized by a lack of proper hygiene and medical services, widespread diseases, high crime and drug rates, and corruption among prison staff. In many cases, radical prisoners are left to socialize with other prisoners without any control or mechanism to organize such a socialization process and without any rehabilitation, reintegration or deradicalization process. "We don't know what to do with them," I am often reminded by some prison authorities in these countries, and "we do not have the resources anyway." Such an environment is not only not conducive to any successful deradicalization programme, but is in itself very radicalizing and could end up further radicalizing already radicalized individuals.

Even Jordan's now widely touted programme, is very small and embryonic, restarted only in January 2016 after a very brief experiment in 2009. It is composed of no more than a simple dialogue process that continues to be rejected by more than 60-70% of inmates. The latter refuse to even speak to the scholars chosen by the government to conduct the dialogue process with the prisoners. Credibility, it seems, is lacking.

To put it another way, very few, if any European or Arab states have fully fledged deradicalization programmes, save Saudi Arabia perhaps! Their efforts, where they have existed, have amounted to no more than processes and measures that are totally delinked from the local context and are not incorporated into a holistic approach based on a good understanding of the phenomenon of radicalization, terrorism or even deradicalization. Proper and well-designed and executed deradicalization programmes not only facilitate rehabilitation of individu-

als who have already crossed the line, but also facilitate the management of the entire prison system, overcome prison radicalization and recruitment, and prevent incarceration centres from becoming schools and universities for terrorism and "jihadism."

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Equally important, is the idea that deradicalization cannot and should not be seen as independent of developments in society. The continued incarceration of individuals on terrorist-related charges suggests that the root causes lie elsewhere; largely in society. After they spend their time in prison and are assumed to have repented, "deradicalized" individuals will eventually be released and will return back to their families, communities and societies. If any of these people remain radical, the chances of recidivism increase.

In other words, what happens inside the wire affects what happens outside the wire and vice versa. To be effective, deradicalization requires equally good and "soft" counter-radicalization policies and programmes that can stem the appeal of VE in society in the first place.

Such an approach requires reframing the entire debate on radicalization, based on a good understanding for the real factors that motivate individuals to become radicalized. It also requires deepening engagement with society and community members, as well as shifting away from the current top-down formats that characterize most, if not all, de-

radicalization policies in Europe and the Arab world. Such policies and approaches are designed, implemented and in most cases managed by the State and its repressive institutions. Cooperation with some civil society organizations, a prerequisite for success, does exist but on a very selective basis and with conditions determined by the State. Such conditions do not build trust between the State and the different communities. On the contrary, they undermine trust and give the impression that counter-radicalization and deradicalization efforts seek infiltration and even corruption in communities. Such an impression played a key role in undermining most deradicalization policies in Europe and the Arab world, including the UK's prevent strategy, which:

"received mixed responses as many experts termed it too narrow, partially transparent, being used for monitoring the immigrant community, and which they believe is counter-productive. Muslim communities also have concerns about it. Transparency is another major issue and it is believed that local authorities misuse funds particularly for corrupting the local communities and building human intelligence networks."<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Deradicalization policies in Europe and the Arab world have failed to deliver the expected outcomes of reducing the appeal of terrorism and dealing effectively with prison radicalization and recruitment. On the contrary, they seem to have inflamed and exacerbated the situation. They are built on incorrect

assumptions and premises, obsessed with intelligence gathering and take the form of a top-down approach that is highly selective in its dealings with communities. They also seem to lack credibility and competent personnel with sufficient knowledge of the process and able to detect real signs of radicalization. Seen as such, deradicalization divides rather than unites communities. The programmes lack a holistic vision and are perceived with pessimism and suspicion by various community members.

**The challenge lies in developing a holistic approach to the phenomenon of violent extremism and terrorism, one that includes all stakeholders from the State, society and even beyond**

There is no one-size-fits-all. Deradicalization policies and programmes need not always look identical, as the early Egyptian and Algerian cases in the late 20th century demonstrated. But they must be based on a good understanding for the motivations for radicalizing groups and individuals in each society. They must also deal with those factors, not only with apprehended individuals and groups.

In other words, deradicalization and prevention at the society level are strongly linked and intertwined. The absence of one undermines the other. The challenge lies in developing a holistic approach to the phenomenon of VE and terrorism, one that includes all stakeholders from the State, society and even beyond.

<sup>15</sup> FARHAN, Zahid. "Analysing the counter radicalization and de-radicalization models," *Foreign Analysis* n°43, Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement, 2016. [www.cf2r.org/images/stories/foreign\\_analyzes/fa-43.pdf](http://www.cf2r.org/images/stories/foreign_analyzes/fa-43.pdf)