



Contributing
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Disengagement and De-radicalization

Introduction

The contents of this brief are based on the discussions that occurred from 3-4 November at an expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism* hosted by Hedayah in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this 2-day expert roundtable was to bring together 20-25 researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a closed discussion of the current trends in CVE research. The goals at the meeting were to 1) address the current research outcomes in countering violent extremism; 2) determine the critical gaps in research on CVE; 3) identify the new and emerging threats of violent extremism; and 4) establish a recommended research agenda for Hedayah and CVE researchers in the coming 2 years.

This Research Brief is a quick-reference guide for researchers, practitioners and policymakers interested in learning more about the current research and future needs and gaps in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) on the topic of Disengagement and De-radicalization. This report reflects the discussions of the participants at the expert workshop, and does not represent the opinion of Hedayah.

In preparation for the meeting, Hedayah worked with Curtin University to map the existing CVE literature and assess the CVE research landscape across four themes: 1) social media and CVE, 2) education and CVE, 3) narratives of victims, survivors and formers for CVE, and 4) Disengagement and De-radicalization.¹¹ Meeting attendees utilized this literature review as a baseline for the discussions. Participants were also invited to prepare short research proposals prior to the meeting for review and discussion by other participants.

In addition to the discussions that occurred at the expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism*, this brief also draws from findings of the literature review conducted by Hedayah and Curtin University, the research proposals that were submitted by the participants, and independent research conducted by the author.

Current Status of Literature

The literature on the disengagement and de-radicalization of individuals and of groups is relatively well-developed compared to other fields of study within countering violent

¹¹ For an electronic version of the mapping activity, please visit www.hedayah.ae

extremism, and primarily consists of empirical studies based on interviews with former violent extremists or case studies of their biographies. Moreover, according to one participant, there are currently 40 countries that have de-radicalization, disengagement and/or rehabilitation programs for violent extremist offenders, and both the practitioner and research communities have some idea of what does work and what does not work in these programs. The successful development of this field of literature is in part due to an increasingly multifaceted and multidisciplinary approach to the subject, drawing also from previously isolated fields of sociology, criminology and psychology.

Within the literature, many scholars note the difference between de-radicalization—which means giving up or softening of an individual’s ideology and involves cognitive and behavioral changes—and disengagement—which means renouncing the use of violence, or renouncing violence temporarily (desistance), but not necessarily forfeiting beliefs or ideological structures. The literature is also clear that the goals of different prison programming related to disengagement, de-radicalization and rehabilitation vary based on the individuals’ and local push and pull factors, and that there is evidence to support that a variety of different approaches have the potential to be successful for different individuals.

Gaps and Needs

The participants identified several gaps and needs for future research related to disengagement and de-radicalization programs for the purposes of preventing and countering violent extremism. The main gaps and needs are described in more detail below:

- 1. Developing standards for evaluating prison rehabilitation programs for violent extremist offenders on an international scale.**

While there are a number of studies within the current body of literature that address individual disengagement and de-radicalization, there is significantly less research on the indicators to show the success of programs for prisoners on disengagement, de-radicalization and/or rehabilitation. However, measurements for successful prison rehabilitation programs need to take into consideration the reasons why the individual offender participates in violent extremism in the first place. Measurement should also take into account the nuances of the push and pull factors between different groups and organizations, as the reasons for joining also varies across different groups, as well as across different demographics within the same group.

- 2. Identifying and defining the terms of “disengagement,” “de-radicalization” and “rehabilitation” in the current literature on the subject.**

Similarly, there needs to be more work done on differentiating between terms, for example between the concepts of violent extremism and terrorism. This was identified as important not only as a conceptual apparatus, but also has practical application in programming. For example, the definition of “radicalization” or “de-radicalization” has an effect on how the success of a “de-radicalization” program is assessed for its impact. Participants also noted that on a programming level, the definitions of these terms are often determined by the government that is running the program, and are not always informed by the literature on the topic.

3. Understanding and being empathetic to the human component of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism.

Participants indicated that also very basic human reasons can be push and pull factors leading to radicalization and recruitment. Quite problematically, while there is a significant body of research within criminology, psychology and sociology that addresses similar issues, exceptionalism regarding terrorism oftentimes see researchers ‘reinventing the wheel’ in terms of explanatory frameworks for political violence. While existing literature can contribute to our understanding or at least provide a useful frame for analysis, there is a significant dearth of information regarding current conceptions of de-radicalization with particular regard to the individual, religious, group and societal conditions that contribute to and hinder the process.

Challenges to Future Research on De-radicalization and Disengagement

A number of challenges arise when conducting research on de-radicalization and disengagement related to potential violent extremists and incarcerated violent extremists. These challenges exist at the level of the community and broader environment, the level of governments, and in terms of academic and conceptual frameworks.

1. Challenges related to community conceptions of and investment in disengagement and de-radicalization programs.

It was noted that a key challenge in understanding radicalization and de-radicalization was the very small population that is of interest. Related to this is the problem of generalizing findings and assumptions around radicalization to the broader community from which the radical emerge.

Another challenge is in investigating and evaluating the link between national CVE programs, counter-radicalization programs and de-radicalization programs in terms of their relationship to the broader environment. In other words, it is not only the individual within a program that needs de-radicalization, disengagement or rehabilitation, it is also the community that needs to be prepared to 1) accept the individual back, 2) to understand the process of radicalization and de-radicalization and 3) to work with authorities on both of these issues. Related to this second point, another main challenge to deradicalization and disengagement includes creating and sustaining social and intellectual spaces where constructive discussions of ideas can occur by the community to achieve the aims listed above.

2. Challenges at the governmental level to disengagement and de-radicalization.

Participants identified one of the obstacles to conducting research on disengagement and de-radicalization, particularly with respect to prisons, is lack of access to programs and individuals within programs. It was suggested that researchers need to do a better job of pitching to governments how research results can show impact, and how those results can help to improve or enhance programming that would be of benefit to governments. In other words, researchers wanting access to prison systems should have a clear idea of what governments could do for their own interest with the data collected before approaching them for access to prisons. However, other participants noted that once a researcher is

networked within the government setting and is established as a trusted researcher, access to prisoners and prisons is relatively easy. Another participant suggested that measuring the success of prison programs may also be assessed at the community level, post-prison release of the individual offenders. Several possibilities for follow-up at the community or public level with regards to prison rehabilitation programs include assessing how international relations and foreign policies affect the success/failure rate of these programs, and addressing conditions conducive in terms of poverty and development indicators.

3. Challenges to Conceptual Framing and Quality.

Participants also indicated that managing the quality of research, both in terms of the actual empirical data collected and in terms of the ethical requirements may be main challenges to research related to disengagement, de-radicalization and rehabilitation for CVE. Participants also suggested that there may be a role for Hedayah in managing the quality and ethics of this research, working in cooperation with the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Working Group Detention and Reintegration to be a repository and clearing house of good practices and ethical standards for this sort of research.

Participants also mentioned that another challenge would be to orchestrate and organize a central, international framework to understand different definitions and constructs related to disengagement, de-radicalization and rehabilitation.

Participants suggested that academic involvement in the structure and set up of prison programs may be one way to overcome the obstacles related to data collection. Many participants agreed that the data needed to help develop more successful programs is already present, but it needs to be collected in a more systematic way. For example, during the process of taking in a prisoner, a more systematic collection of data on gender, educational background, affiliation with violent extremist groups.

Finally, participants also agreed that there needs to be better organization in terms of the available data in other languages besides English, and a translation of that data into other languages (including English). For example, data on prison rehabilitation programs is available in Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia—but that data is not accessible to the English-speaking world, and English publications are not translated into Arabic or Bahasa Indonesian.

Ongoing and Future Programs and Projects

Participants at the Expert Workshop debated a number of research programs and projects that were both ongoing and proposed. Two potential follow-up projects related to disengagement, de-radicalization and rehabilitation are listed below. The descriptions below are paraphrased from the project proposals that were submitted to Hedayah, so please respect the intellectual property rights of those conducting the research. If you would like more information, or if you have a partnership or funding opportunity available, please contact info@hedayah.ae.

1. Preparing Community to Accept Former Offenders and Foreign Fighters (Proposed)

Research Question: How do you effectively prepare a community to accept & support reintegrating violent extremist offenders (VEOs) and Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), avoiding stigmatization?

Description: Over the last decade, tens of thousands of individuals have been arrested and imprisoned on terrorism charges across the globe. Some have undergone a full court process and received a sentence related to the crime of terrorism, some violent extremists have been charged but for different offences (e.g. murder, possession of arms, etc.), others have been detained for over ten years without ever seeing their day in court. At the same time, the 15,000 terrorist fighters that have traveled from a huge variety of countries to the battlegrounds in Syria and Iraq pose a new challenge in this domain. At some stage, these individuals will need to reintegrate back into society. Governments and communities have a role to play in ensuring that these individuals return to play a peaceful role and avoiding recidivism.

This research project will look into theories and good practices of effectively preparing communities to accept & support reintegrating VEOs and FTFs. The research will look at psychological, sociological and community concepts and theories relating to reintegrating offenders of grave crimes in general, and (suspected) terrorism offenders in particular, and ways in which the community can be prepared to support these processes. Secondly, it will turn to some case examples of good practices where these theories have been applied effectively. Thirdly, it will provide specific recommendations to governments and other stakeholders on how to design, implement and monitor programs that prepare the community to receive & support reintegrating individuals.

2. Comparing strategic repertoires among the extremist ISIS travellers: comparing clusters of network organization, structure and function across North America, Australia and Europe (Ongoing)

Research Question: What are the structures and dynamics of ISIS-related networks formed in Western Countries?

Description: This project investigates, maps, and analyzes the structure and dynamics of networks formed in Western countries by people seeking to join and/or fund the terrorist group The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). These networks will be analyzed using the same method I have previously applied to Al-Shabaab (AS) networks formed in Canada, the US, UK, and Australia, thus facilitating a comparative study between the Western networks of the two groups. The hypothesis is that Western adherents to either organization exhibit similar networking patterns: (1) the ideology and broadest goals of both organizations are similar: both groups subscribe to radical or extremist? Islamist ideology and scholars such as Anwar al-Awlaki, and both seek to establish an Islamic caliphate (AS' ideology differs in that it contains an element of Somali nationalism); (2) both groups have produced slickly-edited, English-language propaganda videos which

explicitly appeal to disaffected young Muslim men (and increasingly women) in the West; (3) members of each group radicalized in some of the same locales (e.g. Minneapolis), and Douglas McCain and Troy Kastigar, members of ISIS and AS respectively, even live together in Minneapolis for some time. The proposed study seeks to identify and compare the networks of both groups. This study will also suggest implications of the findings for the efficacy of security responses designed to deter, detect and dismantle domestic terrorist networks.