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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dechesne, M. (2011). Deradicalization: not soft, but strategic. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 55(4), 287-292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-011-9283-8>

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Deradicalization: Not soft, but strategic

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Abstract The present article considers deradicalization programs. It is observed that deradicalization is primarily a strategic tool, that it was already used in the 1970s, that it can occur spontaneously, and that it should be differentiated from physical disengagement. An evaluation of existing deradicalization programs lead to the propositions that 1) deradicalization programs in the area of right-wing extremism primarily focus on changing behavior not thoughts, that 2) currently there is insufficient insight in what motives people to deradicalize, and 3) that insights from psychology are still insufficiently used to increase effectiveness of deradicalization. Research can make an important contribution to optimize efficiency of deradicalization for counterterrorism purposes.

Keywords Deradicalization, Psychology, Terrorism, Persuasion, Strategy

Deradicalization: Not soft, but strategic

Deradicalization is hot. In 2007, Time magazine [1] reviewed what they considered the most revolutionary ideas of the 21st century. Reversing radicalism, deradicalization, figured prominently among them. The Time article marks quite a change from the initial response to the September 11th attacks in 2001 that involved a widespread call for an all out military campaign targeted at all those threatening freedom.

However, deradicalization should not be considered soft. It is strategic. Deradicalization seeks to prevent further escalation of violence. Moreover, and this makes disengagement and deradicalization different, deradicalization creates the conditions conducive to dialogue. Deradicalization is therefore an important strategic tool in the fight against terrorism. And not surprisingly, then, it is being embraced by many. In Europe, countries such as the Netherlands and the UK follow with great interest developments in Asia and North Africa where the first results of large-scale deradicalization attempts are being published [2]. In this article, partly based on recent publications in the field of deradicalization, I will discuss the nature of deradicalization, evaluate existing deradicalization programs, and identify areas of attention to enhance understanding and efficiency of deradicalization.

Four observations

Let me start with some general observations. These observations form the basis for a general characterization of the phenomenon.

I have already mentioned the first observation: *Deradicalization is not soft, but strategic*. Terrorism can create a "jiujutsu" dynamic [3]. That is, harsh, military reactions against terrorism may alienate potential sympathizers with a terrorist cause and expand the terrorists' pool of recruits. Effective counterterrorism policy should then strive to break the cycle of violent action and response. Deradicalization, whereby radicals abandon violence and are brought back into society, may constitute an effective tool to do so.

The second: *Deradicalization is not new*. While the increased number of publications on the topic suggests that deradicalization is a modern invention, it was already applied in the seventies [4]. The PLO dismantled its Black September and brought them to a more moderate path through methods that resemble those of deradicalization. Members of the Black September were given the prospect of marriage with a carefully selected bride and of a reward of \$ 3,000 for marriage with an additional bonus of \$ 5,000 for a first child. Individuals in the program also got an apartment with cooking facilities, refrigerator and television, in addition to a desk job at the PLO. The British government experimented with temporary prison leaves and vocational training as ways to bring back IRA convicts to civil society. The Italian government used special repentance laws to facilitate Red Brigade members to abandon the organization.

Third observation: *Deradicalization may arise spontaneously*. Deradicalization may not require any coordinated action to get it underway [5]. There can be several reasons for why members of terrorist organization may spontaneously deradicalize. The peer pressure in an organization can be experienced as unpleasant. A terrorist organization is composed of many violent people, and that violence can also be directed inwards. Members of the group may also develop self-doubts, or question whether the ideals of the organization will ever be achieved, or start doubting whether reality is living up to expectation. Tanja Nijmijer, a Dutch member of FARC, for example, frequently notes in her recovered diaries that her everyday life is far off from the idealistic commitment the FARC organization attempts to publically portray [6].

Fourth observation: *It is important to differentiate between physical and psychological forms of disengagement*. For a number of reasons, a member of a terrorist organization may no longer be able to engage in violence but may maintain a firm belief in the righteousness of the cause. Deradicalization pertains to the disappearance of radical thoughts, not just radical behavior. Arrests, forced change within the organization, exclusion from the group, or a change in interest, can all lead to physical withdrawal from violent engagement without psychological deradicalization. Also, a lack of resources, goals, or the presence of alternative goals, may leave even the most devoted member of the terrorist organization out of work. Behavior may be blocked, but there is no change in attitudes.

The nature of radicalization and the workings of deradicalization programs

The nature of deradicalization can thus be summarized as in Figure 1. The figure describes deradicalization using two dimensions. The first, vertical dimension pertains to psychological change (top) vs behavioral change (bottom). The second, horizontal dimension pertains the locus of change. On the left, endogenous influences pertain to those changes in behavior or thought that are self-initiated. On the right, exogenous influences pertain to changes in radical thoughts/behaviors that are brought about by external influences. From the current

perspective, deradicalization, i.e. the systematic moderation of radical *thoughts*, should above all implicate 1) an attempt to create the circumstances under which individuals become more open to alternative viewpoints; and 2) an attempt to externally bring the radicalized individual to more moderate viewpoints. If there is no self-initiated openness to change beliefs, external attempts to moderate radical beliefs are unlikely to be successful. If there is no external regulation of self-initiated belief change, deradicalization may lose its strategic use. Going back to Figure 1, then, deradicalization programs should pertain to both the left and right upper quadrant of the figure.

With this scheme in mind, I have studied a number of publications reporting on deradicalization programs [7]. These programs include the Exit Programs initiated by Tjore Bjørge in Scandinavia and Germany that pertain to the extreme right. The programs also include Asian (in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore, and Indonesia) deradicalization programs targeting Jihadis. Let me summarize my primary findings in the form of propositions.

Proposition 1: "Deradicalization" programs for the extreme right primarily target the behavioral aspects of involvement in an extremist organization. It is questionable, then, whether these programs provide adequate insight into deradicalization.

The EXIT programs set up by Tjore Bjørge in several Scandinavian countries and Germany for the extreme right primarily seek to facilitate the disengagement from extremist group [8]. It thus targets those who have already decided themselves to disengage. The programs promote opportunities for neo-Nazi's who wish to exit, by coaching them through the EXIT program. Furthermore, the programs use various means to influence the behavior of the radicals, including the involvement of parents to detect signals of radicalization and to stop further engagement in the extreme right, and the use of "serious conversations" to be undertaken by parents or police. These conversations do not involve a substantive discussion on radical right-wing ideology, but rather seek to emphasize the serious repercussions that involvement in extreme right-wing groups might have. The EXIT programs never seek to influence the individuals' worldview through external influence. As a result, these programs may be less suited to reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities of deradicalization.

Proposition 2: There is insufficient insight into what motivates people to deradicalize.

This is partly due to the setup of deradicalization programs. Virtually all programs that seek to deradicalize Islamic radicals are based on establishing a dialogue between the radical and an authority taking a moderate stance[9]. The rationale is that through this dialogue, the beliefs of the radical will gradually shift towards the moderate viewpoint. In Singapore and Yemen, the moderate position is taken by a clergyman. In Saudi Arabia, a team of clergymen, psychologists, consultants and external communication advisors, is involved. Indonesia uses prominent former radicals.

Most Asian deradicalization programs target prisoners. As a reward for participating in the program, prisoners are sometimes promised release. This, however, yields a peculiar situation. People can participate because of a very practical reward: freedom. As a result, it is hard to determine the sincerity of the motives for participating. But the effectiveness of these deradicalization programs cannot be assessed without taking into account what motivated the deradicalization process in the first place. Thus, there is insufficient insight into what really motivates people to deradicalize.

Proposition 3: Insights from psychology are still insufficiently used to increase effectiveness of deradicalization.

The consideration of the EXIT programs and Islamic deradicalization efforts suggests that they fail to implicate *both* of the two crucial elements of deradicalization: promoting inner openness for a change of mind, and presenting alternative views from the outside. The discipline of psychology has much to say about how to optimize the conditions for both. It is remarkable, then, that in the radicalization literature very little attention is paid to psychological research, in particular research in the area of social cognition which specializes in attitude and belief change.

How can social psychological insights be used to better understand the deradicalization process? Perhaps a line of research that I conducted together with colleagues from the University of Arizona and the University of British Columbia can clarify [10]. Just before the US presidential elections in 2008 we investigated the circumstances under which people are willing to believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. The research may not be directly related to the issue of terrorism, but it is related to the willingness to adopt false beliefs and the creation of the circumstances under which such beliefs are adopted or discarded.

In three studies, participants were asked about their political preferences. Moreover, half the subjects were asked to indicate their skin-color just prior to the experiment. Because all subjects were Caucasian, the question induced a sense of difference between the participant and Barack Obama for half of the participants. Republican participants were more likely to associate Barack Obama with Islam than Democratic participants. Also, the subtle induction of a sense of difference based on race lead participants to more strongly associate Barack Obama with Islam and the belief that he is a Muslim.

Hence, it appears that people are particularly sensitive to the information that Obama is a Muslim when (1) they already disagreed with him ideologically, (2) when the psychological distance between the participant and Barack Obama was subtly enlarged by pointing to differences in skin color. Our research thus suggests that achieving a sense of similarity, a sense of “we-ness”, may very well be an important condition under which deradicalization can work. First one creates the perception of similarity between the radical and the person seeking to deradicalize, and then and only then it becomes possible to influence the radical’s belief. This is, of course, highly consistent with the idea proposed in this article that deradicalization should contain two critical elements: promoting inner openness for a change of mind, and presenting alternative views from the outside.

Conclusion

Deradicalization may be considered the jewel in the crown of modern counterterrorism techniques. It's a potentially very valuable strategic tool enabling to break a dangerous spiral of violence between terrorists and counterterrorists. At this point, however, it is difficult to determine whether deradicalization works, because it is not sufficiently clear *how exactly deradicalization processes* work. Research can make an important contribution to optimize efficiency of deradicalization for counterterrorism purposes.

The starting point for this research must be that deradicalization is not soft, but strategic. Implementing a strategic operation involves consideration of goals and assessment and evaluation of a situation, the identification of problem areas that need to be addressed, and a plan for how to address the problems areas. When deradicalization is considered within a frame of strategy, psychological questions will inevitably need to be answered: What does the "architecture" of radical ideas look like? What exactly do you want change, and where is it mentally represented? What methods are most effective to bring about belief change? Under what circumstances can deradicalization best take place? What "incentives" encourage deradicalization? Are there individual differences?

In a counterterrorism climate that increasingly becomes to see the value of deradicalization, answering these questions should be assigned high priority.

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Figure 1: Two-dimensional structure of deradicalization.

