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WHY DO WE NEED A HANDBOOK ON DISENGAGEMENT AND DERADICALISATION?

Stig Jarle Hansen and Stian Lid

Radicalisation and violent extremism are global challenges. Although the allure of the Islamic State weakened when the latter faced battlefield defeats in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State has gained recruits in other places, and racist and hate groups have increased their activities in the West (Kennedy, 2014; Koehler, 2016; Pestano, 2016). There are no signs of these challenges diminishing in the future; rather the contrary. The rise of the Islamic State saw between 27,000 and 31,000 fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq, many of whom returned to their home countries after the battlefield defeats suffered by the Islamic State after 2014. The Islamic State has also mobilised sympathisers around the world (Khalil and Shanahan, 2016). There are also numerous reports on increasing right-wing violence in many larger countries, such as the United States (Jones, 2018).

As new and violent extremist groups and environments emerge, there is an increasing need for knowledge of not only how individuals physically exit these movements, but also how to change their mindset and how to stimulate the deradicalisation and disengagement processes. As of today, a veritable marketplace for new deradicalisation and disengagement efforts has been established. Not all of the new actors are serious. Moreover, the knowledge foundation was, at times, lacking (for examples, see Hansen, Lid, and Okwani, 2019; Schulze, 2008). A plethora of methods has been used, and a large number of different types of deradicalisation and disengagement programmes have been developed for different arenas (Speckhard, 2011). Yet, the expansion was based upon uncertain foundations, difficult dilemmas and imperfect understandings (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, 2014; Dechesne, 2011; Feddes, 2015; Schuurman and Bakker, 2016). The literature focusing on the disengagement and deradicalisation programmes has primarily been more isolated descriptions of specific programmes or countries, and many studies have focused on prison-based offender rehabilitation programmes. The regional focus in the studies or edited volumes has mainly been on the Middle East or South Asia or on the Western perspective (Koehler, 2017, pp. 28–30).

The aim of this book is to start to fill some of these gaps in the literature on disengagement and deradicalisation. This volume has the ambition of contributing with new
knowledge on the approaches, strategies and initiatives taken by various implementing actors globally to support disengagement and deradicalisation processes. The book includes new perspectives on the softer approaches to counterterrorism applied by transnational organisations, local governments, civil society, religious actors, prisons and others. In addition to its global perspectives, it will include specific regional chapters, and contain both the perspectives of practitioners and researchers, and regional and global organisations. The book will shed light on the various debates around different approaches to and thinking around disengagement and deradicalisation processes in addition to bringing forward new and less known perspectives not only from a theoretical angle, but also from a more practical perspective in relation to experiences and lessons learned from specific groups and areas.

Concept and problems

One of the major problems is the definition of radicalisation, as well as disengagement and deradicalisation (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, 2014; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009; Koehler, 2017). The lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity has “led to political and practical action executed with largely absent theoretical frameworks or clear-cut concepts” (Koehler, 2017, p. 2). A rough point of departure would be to look at a process in which a person’s commitment to ideological violence is reduced, differentiating deradicalisation and disengagement from prevention. Prevention is actually to be implemented before a person has the ideological commitment to violence. However, there are grey areas between prevention, disengagement and deradicalisation. Following Koehler in this book, prevention is a part of deradicalisation work partly to prevent recidivism into violent or extremist behaviour and thought patterns after an intervention has taken place, reducing existing commitment to the group and cause. Prevention also comes into play with cases in early stages of radicalisation, where one can try to prevent further radicalisation, which is where intervention and preventative methods mix. The key to deradicalisation, however, is to intervene with an existing commitment to a violent extremist group and ideology and to reduce that commitment.

It is possible to group definitions of deradicalisation into a “narrow” type that only includes rejection of ideological violence, and a “broad” version that includes rejection of an ideological worldview that could legitimise violence; the former type is often referred to as disengagement. During the first phase of the British Prevent programme, it may be that violent action is to be avoided, sometimes defined as disengagement – a mere physical and behavioural role change. However, the target could also be more comprehensive, such as changing the radical worldview itself. The target could also be a combination of the two. The first version becomes close to “disengagement” – behaviour changes – while the ideological or psychological aspects are left aside (Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Koehler, 2017). Some researchers will maintain that disengagement is the more feasible option; others would say that without addressing the ideology’s attraction points there is a much higher risk of re-radicalisation and failure to exit. Successful programmes based on both views exist.

A focus-changing worldview could quickly develop into “thought policing” and even alienate potential allies by attempting to police opinions rather than actions (Edwards, 2016). Indeed, the end state you should “deradicalise” from is in itself contested. “Radical” is perceived as a relative concept (Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). Some even see radicalisation as in some cases reflecting something positive, such as an inclination to act to improve society, that needs to be harnessed. Reidy (2019), for example, sees altruism as an important
feature in such processes that can be harnessed, also for humanitarian purposes, avoiding violence in the process. There have been several efforts to define and make distinctions between “problematic” radicals and acceptable and unproblematic radicals; for instance, making the distinction between “(open-minded) radical” and “(close-minded) extremist” or between “violent extremist” and “non-violent extremist” (Schmid, 2013, p. 10). One has to keep in mind that deradicalisation programmes run in totalitarian, or semi-totalitarian, regimes, and a focus on deradicalisation as changing a mindset can be misused (Aggarwal, 2013; Joseba and Douglass, 1996; Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, and Robinson, 2008; Winkler, 2006). Deradicalisation could easily become an excuse to prevent political activism for promoting democracy, political dialogue or the promotion of minority rights. Indeed, it could serve as a justification for avoiding deeper societal changes, as expressed by Al Jazeera’s Margot Kiser with regard to deradicalisation programmes in East Africa: “It [deradicalisation] seems a concept 100% politicised even before out the gate.”

Even in Western countries, the attempted change of a person’s religious or political opinions is morally questionable, as these are usually protected by democratic freedoms and not subjected to criminalisation. Some of these problems are also encountered in disengagement; after all, disengagement from groups striving for non-violent change in authoritarian regimes is another form of enhancing those regimes.

However, while deradicalisation and disengagement have an oppressive potential, they are also potential alternatives to the use of force. As shown by Hansen (2017), deradicalisation and disengagement can in some cases empower minorities, as they become seen as key allies in such processes. Deradicalisation can also be a soft alternative to security services and police. We should emphasise that here, as deradicalisation often is implemented by the police and/or other security services and can be used for intelligence or evidence gathering (Koehler, 2017). A separation between security services and the deradicalisation programme might present deradicalisation as a clearer alternative to the use of the police, and avoid reduction of trust in and legitimacy of the social services that provide deradicalisation programmes. However, a separation might lead to cooperation and coordination problems between various pertinent agencies. Access to relevant information from, for example, school and health services, depending also on the interpretation of the local legal framework, and police intentions of pursuing prosecution might hinder the use of deradicalisation programmes, or hamper the flow of information from the police to institutions doing deradicalisation (Lid, Winsvold, Soholt, Hansen, Heierstad, and Klausen, 2016).

There are other problems when trying to implement radicalisation programmes as well. Problems with implementing disengagement and deradicalisation programmes include the tendency to neglect the wider environment, under-prioritising the intersection between deradicalisation and reintegration, and how contextual factors mediate the success of these two (Marsden, 2017, p. 3; Clubb and Tapley, 2018). Instead, the problem is positioned in the mind of the individual (Marsden, 2017, p. 3). Successful disengagement and deradicalisation involve both leaving the extremist environment and re-engaging with the non-extremist milieu (Barelle, 2015).

To measure success is also hard. Comparative studies are rare (El-Said, 2015; Horgan and Braddock, 2010); wider comparative studies of strategies have often not been done, a fact that we will attempt to remedy in this book. Second, in some cases, programmes have been so secretive that it becomes hard to assess their success or failure (El-Said, 2015; Hansen, Lid, and Okwani, 2019). Third, the process of leaving extremism, avoiding recidivism and fully reintegration into mainstream society is a process that goes far beyond programmes, and is influenced by the reintegrating communities and contextual factors which shape the
capacity to facilitate or resist reintegration. The complexity of factors that influence the reintegration process significantly complicate measuring the success of programmes (Clubb and Tapley, 2018). Moreover, some deradicalisation programmes depend on the participants themselves taking active steps to participate, leading to self-selection that might in turn enhance the success rate. Re-activism amongst imprisoned terrorists is also lower than for the common prison population, thus re-activism on its own might not be such a good indicator of success (Koehler, 2017).

Different types of goals also give different rates of success. A programme focusing on removing problematic ideology and behaviour is more complex than a programme that only focuses on behaviour, and success becomes harder to operationalise, making it harder to compare the programmes. This in turn opens up a wider discussion over cost efficiency. For example, in the United States, deradicalisation programmes have been limited compared to Europe, and very often implemented by private actors. Nevertheless, the United States has had relatively few radical jihadist groups and foreign fighters joining the Islamic State compared to European countries (Bakker and Singleton, 2016; Soufan Group, 2015).

There has been a lack of a thorough discussion of the type of territorial presence of groups from which individuals are to be removed. Radical groups may range from what resemble insurgency outfits to small clandestine networks, and such groups can actually control territories in a civil war-like scenario, or have a semi-territorial presence enabling them to punish participants in deradicalisation programmes, where working in radical groups actually pays better than other jobs (Hansen, 2019). Situations arise where radical groups actually have links to parts of the authorities (ibid). Targeting also needs to be discussed, as research increasingly shows that some of these networks, clustered in areas with relatively similarly socioeconomic characteristics, are for example more vulnerable to foreign recruitment than others (Perliger and Milton, 2016). Targeting can also lead to stigmatisation of wider groups if not carefully implemented (O’Toole, Meer, DeHanas, Jones, and Modood, 2016). Gender is also seldom discussed in the deradicalisation literature, although both the Islamic State and right-wing groups have placed the issue on the agenda (Braunthal, 2009).

This book hopes to highlight some of these problems, sometimes giving solutions, but at other times at least presenting the dilemmas and theoretical consequences. Indeed, the problems are many. Yet, deradicalisation and disengagement are important themes, because of the scope of the activities implemented in their name, as well as because of the number of genuine idealists involved. They do provide a tool to use against radical groups. The above problems should be seen as problems to be solved or dilemmas to be handled. Deradicalisation has great potential, which is as yet untapped. There are definitively both ethical problems and problems with regard to the lack of knowledge, as well as when it comes to the interaction between researchers, practitioners and even former participants, to make these projects more efficient. This book is also a way to promote such interaction, and bring conceptual differences to the forefront, thus contributors are allowed some conceptual freedom, yet categories of types of disengagement and deradicalisation are still needed.

Categorising disengagement and deradicalisation

Disengagement and deradicalisation is a field that is in need of being systematised, and categorisation may help us when studying the wider subject field; for example, different mechanisms of leaving, the different actors involved in the disengagement/deradicalisation process and variations in their roles.
The process of disengagement and deradicalisation can, for example, be voluntary or involuntary/forced. However, some programmes in prisons can be understood as a hybrid between voluntary and involuntary, taking into account the circumstances in detention facilities (El-Said, 2015). Second, the efforts are either individual or collective, and these processes may be distinctive. The latter refer to programmes or efforts addressing entire groups or organisations. Third, as discussed above, the process of leaving radical or extremist groups can be physical and/or psychological (disengagement or deradicalisation). Finally, the processes are permanent or temporary (Ferguson, 2010). In addition to these critical distinctions, we can draw a line between those who leave extremism on their own, without any support from formal institutions (governmental and non-governmental), which it is argued are the majority of former high-ranking terrorists and low-level extremists (Barelle, 2015; Horgan, 2009), and those who receive any kind of support. The latter group is the group primarily discussed in the chapters in this volume.

Another significant distinction when understanding the processes of leaving is between push and pull factors. Push factors are experiences related to an individual’s involvement in a particular social movement that drive him or her away and include disillusionment with the group’s strategy or actions, loss of faith in the ideology, disagreements with group leaders or members, and burnout. Pull factors are influences outside the group that attract the person to a more rewarding alternative than continuing in the movement or group, such as the promise of amnesty or material rewards, desire to marry and have a family, and the demands of a conventional career. Hence, many of the relevant factors are personal factors that are difficult for others to influence, but a range of factors, both push and pull factors, are relevant in the effort to persuade individuals to leave extremism (Altier, Boyle, Shortland, and Horgan, 2017; Bjørgo, 2016). If a more holistic approach to disengagement and deradicalisation is taken, the perspective of sustained disengagement is distinct between various levels of integration (Barelle, 2015). Minimal levels of engagement are those that do not wish to engage with mainstream society, even if they have stopped using violence or other radical methods. The cautious level of engagement with society after exiting extremism is undertaken by those persons engaged in a limited or hesitant manner. They are not reaching their full potential for happiness or wellbeing. A positive level of engagement represents full integration, and this occurs when individuals enjoy healthy and functional relationships with people around them, irrespective of their group categorisations (ibid).

There are also some critical distinctions between actors who implement initiatives, activities or programmes for promoting disengagement and deradicalisation processes. There is an important distinction between government and non-government actors (Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009). Yet this handbook also shows the relevance of often neglected transnational actors such as the United Nations and the European Union. Operators in the wider field of disengagement and deradicalisation include the police, the intelligence service and other security forces, prison, state social services, public health institutions, religious institutions (both government-controlled and non-government-controlled), civil society actors, aid organisations and political parties.

There are variations in the roles of these different actors. An actor involved in disengagement and deradicalisation can serve as the main implementer who designs the programmes and handles the financial aspects. Many such actors can also serve as agents, acting on behalf of another institution. Some might serve as contributors, taking responsibility for parts of the programmes. Last, and perhaps of least importance, are the external advisors, the actors who host awareness programmes and facilitate the training of trainers. Most of the actors mentioned above can serve in
all of these roles. Different countries might prefer different configurations of agents, main implementers, external advisors and contributors. In the United States, municipality administrations have traditionally had fewer services to implement than Scandinavian municipalities, which very often are the major agents in implementing the welfare state services. This may be why municipalities enjoy a prominent role in the Scandinavian disengagement and deradicalisation arena, although the same implementers are notably absent from the American arena. Similarly, organisations doing development activities, such as the Department for International Development, will be involved in disengagement and deradicalisation in Asia and Africa.

The practical partnership arrangements will influence implementation. As mentioned earlier, the involvement of justice sector actors may create fear of misuse of the programmes for intelligence purposes. On the other hand, a correct mix of actors may create expertise, enhance information flows and introduce mechanisms of checks and balances.

Outline of the book

The handbook is divided into three parts. The first is a general part focusing on overreaching issues; the second explores the involvement of various actors in promoting disengagement and deradicalisation; the third is a set of case studies from around the world to introduce the reader to the interaction between the local context, overreaching issues and variations in organisations. The first part starts with Daniel Koehler, who will set the stage for the rest of the book by discussing the key concepts of disengagement and deradicalisation, before Stig Jarle Hansen gives a brief historical overview of these concepts and shows how these concepts are developed from wider relevant fields. The book proceeds with a chapter on the viability of phase-based models to deradicalisation, written by Liesbeth Mann, Lars Nickolson, Allard R. Feddes, Bertjan Doosje, and Fathali M. Moghaddam, and continues with David Webber, Marina Chernikova, Erica Molinario and Arie W. Kruglanski’s discussion of the most common psychological approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement, showing direct and indirect mechanisms of deradicalisation. An underanalysed field is the role of gender in deradicalisation and disengagement work, which will be explored by Jennifer Philippa Eggert. Stig Jarle Hansen then contextualises deradicalisation and disengagement in the light of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration and the territorial presence of the radical group involved. Arie Perliger analyses important aspects of deradicalisation, disengagement, and reintegration of foreign fighters.

The second part, focusing on various actors, starts with Jessica Stern and Paige Pascarelli’s description of challenges faced by deradicalisation programmes in prison. It continues with the analyses of the role of municipalities and local governments written by Stian Lid, Tina Wilchen Christensen’s analysis of the role of civil society, and Rached Ghannouchi’s description of the potential of religion in deradicalisation work. The next three chapters analyse the role of transnational organisations. First, Hans-Jakob Schindler presents United Nations work on the field, second, Sarah Léonard, Christian Kaunert, and Ilim Yakubov analyse the involvement of the African Union. Anneli Botha then proceeds to discuss the engagement of the African Union (AU).

The last part of the book focuses on regional case studies. This part starts in Europe with the chapters about disengagement and deradicalisation strategies and initiatives in Benelux written by Amy-Jane Gielen; the chapter about the UK is written by Mohammed Samir Elshimi and, finally, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen and Jakob Ilum analyse the situation in Scandinavia. Thereafter, we move to the East and start with a chapter written by Bhavna Singh
exploring the Chinese context, before Bahadar Nawab analyses South Asia. Next, Lihi Ben Shitrit explores deradicalisation in the Israeli–Palestinian context.

The book’s focus then moves on to Africa, where Martine Zeuthen explores disengagement and deradicalisation work in the shadow of the Harakat al Shabaab and the Islamic State. The last regional area includes the chapter on disengagement and deradicalisation in North America by Mubin Shaikh, Hicham Tiflati, Phil Gurski, and Amarnath Amarasingam, and Irina Chineda ends with a study of Latin American work against right- and left-wing radical groups. In the conclusion the editors, Stig Jarle Hansen and Stian Lid, bring together the main findings and ideas of this handbook.

Note

1 Correspondence with the writer.

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