Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement

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CONCLUSION

Stig Jarle Hansen and Stian Lid

This handbook’s global scope demonstrates clearly that the idea of assisting people out of an extremist milieu and/or violent extreme behaviour through disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives has more or less become a manifested strategy worldwide. The phenomenon has to be studied in the light of the broader strategy of countering violent extremism (CVE), which emphasises softer measures within both preventive and reactive strategies, and the growing acknowledgement of the limited effect and high economic cost of repressive strategies. Disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives have the potential to reduce human, social and economic costs by leading to a permanent end of violent behaviour and ideology.

Although the appearance of disengagement and deradicalisation strategies is worldwide, we see important distinctions between present practices. Programmes for disengagement and deradicalisation are to a large degree country-dependent, but there are also variations within individual countries; this volume clearly shows that variations exist between both global and state levels, as well as between local and state levels.

One of the variations is between those countries that have a multifaceted approach with a range of “soft” interventions and those countries that remain in an approach dominated by repression and prosecution. Especially for those countries with a multifaceted approach, a range of actors are invited to contribute with their expertise and interventions, such as social and health institutions, local governments, non-governmental organisations and civil societies. That has led to a wide scope of disengagement and deradicalisation interventions. The interventions illustrated in many chapters in this volume can be categorised as: (1) practical support; (2) social support; (3) psychological and health treatment/counselling; and (4) ideological counselling. Practical support consists of, among other things, finding a job, vocational training and education, economic support, housing, and so on. Social support can involve both strategies to utilise the primary social networks to re-anchor the former extremist in non-radical networks such as family and friends, but also to develop the activist’s social skills. Moreover, psychological counselling and health treatment are common strategies in many programmes. Finally, ideological counselling is an effort to inoculate and turn the activist against the appeal of ideologies of terrorist groups. The latter is what Webber et al. (Chapter 5) categorise as the method that can directly lead to deradicalisation through countering the ideological narrative, but the other interventions can indirectly facilitate deradicalisation in addition to disengagement by influencing underlying psychological mechanisms. They
argue that to feel significant in their own and in others’ eyes, which can be affected by new social networks and strengthened personal skills, will decrease the appeal of terrorist ideology.

The chapters demonstrate variations between countries and programmes in which interventions are prominent. An important distinction is the variations in ideology counselling. As demonstrated in this volume, as in other publications, ideology counselling is not a prominent strategy in Scandinavia, but it is more prominent in the Middle East and South East Asia, where the initiatives revolve to a great extent around ideology and theology. For another group of countries, such as the UK, Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands, ideological/religious counselling is offered “upon demand” and remains seen as an important disengagement/deradicalisation tool. The differences between most of the countries seem to a large extent not to be whether religious counselling is part of the potential interventions, but to what extent the programmes focus on ideological/theological re-education.

What has become evident in this book is the importance of a more holistic approach that not only focuses on the processes of leaving violent extremism, but also includes reintegration processes in a non-extremist environment. A successful and permanent disengagement is about the engagement the person has with wider society. Chapters show the significance of increasing the social skills, new social network, and so on, of the former extremist to strengthen the possibilities for resettling in mainstream society, and at the same time the importance of local conditions for reintegration. The local security situation as well as the local society’s general willingness to reintegrate a former extremist are decisive for the reintegration into a law-abiding life.

As shown above, there are various strategies to promote disengagement and deradicalisation, and many of the contributors in this volume stress that combining the various strategies in multifaceted interventions tailored to individual needs is more likely to produce successful outcomes. The initiatives are also context-specific and depend on the available institutions and legal, cultural and social factors. Thus, programmes cannot be directly transferred to another country with a different cultural, social and political context, but they need to be carefully adapted to the local situation.

As highlighted by Arie Perliger in Chapter 8, the socio-political climate is important for the type of intervention accepted. Some countries have for instance experienced challenges with implementing “soft” deradicalisation policies due to political pressure against such strategies, as well as public opposition. This has been prominent for foreign fighters, who often represent marginal communities that are not part of mainstream culture, and have limited political capital, in addition to the strong sense of betrayal that proliferates in some of the societies that “export” foreign fighters. This book shows a range of relevant approaches and interventions, but at the same time, it demonstrates the importance of local context and the contextual limitation and possibilities.

Who is doing what, and why?

This book clarifies how a variety of actors, from international organisations (such as the United Nations), regional organisations (such as the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU)), state governments, civil society and religious networks implement and/or support disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives. Two other categories are also discussed in this volume: the family and the private business sector. At the micro level, the individual who tries to disengage or deradicalise a friend or an acquaintance also makes up part of the types of actors involved in deradicalisation.

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The chapters in this book show clearly the great variations from country to country of which actors are important, and the comparative drawbacks and advantages of different categories of actors, are discussed. For instance, in the United States, municipalities have been of limited importance, while law enforcement agencies are key. However, in Scandinavia, as illustrated in the chapters of Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen and Jakob Ilum, as well as Stian Lid, municipalities are the most significant actors; in Kenya the central state seems to delegate most responsibility, while local governance structures take some responsibility. In some scenarios, multi-national organisations become very important, such as the United Nations in Somalia (see Stig Jarle Hansen and Martine Zeuthen’s contributions to this book). However, the deradicalisation field is dynamic and Amy Jane Gielen, for example, demonstrates that the picture is altering in the Benelux with the state “coming in the back way” as non-governmental organisations turn into government-organised non-governmental organisations, and government funding plays a bigger part.

Some of the contributors here stress important points with regard to both the advantages and possibilities and the liabilities of various actors. Tina Wilchen Christensen argues that civil society actors are in a better position to gain legitimacy among extremists and in building trusting relations due to their potential distance and independence from the state, considered by some segments of the population as an enemy. In totalitarian scenarios, Lihi Ben Shitrit considers civil society actors as very important alternatives to misuse of disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives in totalitarian states. These authors underline that civil society actors in some cases can enjoy more trust than state institutions amongst parts of the population. However, Mubin Shaikh, Hicham Tiflati, Phil Gurski and Amarnath Amarasingam also show how distrust between the government and parts of civil society might create problems, although they argue that in one of their cases, Canada, there is great trust in civil society.

Although state actors can have setbacks due to restricted trust among target groups, they may have other advantages depending on the available resources, structures and functions. Particularly in welfare states, state actors can provide a range of social, health and economic support. In many countries, these actors are also obliged to deliver these services, and they can use already existing institutions, structures, personnel and services, which means that at least some functions or services are available, but also sustainable over time. Yet, this can also lead to misuse: Mohammed Elshimi demonstrates how healthcare has gained a role in deradicalisation and disengagement programmes, but also how this is abused by government institutions, channelling psychologically ill individuals though channels intended for disengagement in order to save funds.

Finally, there may also be contradictions between national and local levels. Gielen illuminates how more local municipality-led or regional programmes could lead to more fragmentation. On the other hand, Dalggaard-Nielsen and Ilum argue that local programmes may have greater pragmatism and flexibility, while national programmes to a larger extent can be influenced by ideological rigour and politics.

The efficiency of the actor does not always determine which actors are emphasised and supported at a national level, but it is highly influenced by political, cultural and legal elements unique to a given country. As illustrated above, in Scandinavia municipalities are a major actor in providing welfare services, and indeed crime prevention. Hence, in one sense, it was expected that municipalities got a major role in promoting deradicalisation and disengagement. As illustrated by Bahadar Nawab, in Pakistan the army is the backbone of the state, providing the strongest and dominant institution; thus, similarly, it is to be expected that the army takes a lead in disengagement and deradicalisation work. In totalitarian states, civil society is curtailed; thus it should be expected that civil society plays a less
active role. However, we also see patterns that go beyond both rational choices of actors based on their efficiency and political traditions favouring some institutions. Arie Perliger shows that patronage and personal networks could influence who gains deradicalisation and disengagement tasks.

The book also illustrates a knowledge gap in how the interaction between various actors plays out. We lack research on the interaction between the global level actors in deradicalisation and disengagement, the regional level actors and the local actors; here there are possibilities for synergic effects. Schindler highlights how the United Nations pushed for changes in national legal systems and made country assessments, recommendations, surveys and analytical products available throughout the United Nations system, and aided the implementation of various provisions. In some cases, such as in Somalia, they were directly involved with implementation on the ground. Similarly, Kaunert, Léonard and Yakubov elucidate the importance of the EU coordination mechanisms, including the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), and also how the EU had an important influence on legal standardisation targeting jihadi propaganda, also because online actors were dependent on access to EU countries.

The lack of studies of interaction between the state and the regional/global level shows one of the major challenges that disengagement and deradicalisation face: lack of research. Yet this book, by bringing together many leading theoreticians and practitioners, also provides some solutions to several of these challenges. The book also clarifies several challenges that often seem to have been forgotten.

**Challenges facing disengagement and deradicalisation**

Some of the challenges facing the field of deradicalisation and disengagement are well known and have been discussed in many of the books and articles studying deradicalisation and disengagement in the past. A thoroughly discussed and analysed point, both in this volume and in past articles, is the problem of the measurement of success. *Firstly*, deradicalisation and disengagement programmes often have selection mechanisms focusing on what is seen as individuals with potential for deradicalisation; they may thus have selective positive recruitment, that is, recruit participants who would deradicalise or disengage themselves. Thus successes allegedly created by deradicalisation/disengagement programmes could be the result of other processes unrelated to the formal programmes. Amy-Jane Gielen in this volume rightly argues that risk assessment should be an integral part of any evaluation of a deradicalisation/disengagement programme, and many of the chapters in this book illustrate that different personalities amongst the participants in programmes also mean that different strategies are needed, and that success rates differ. *Secondly*, as illustrated by the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni cases, a correct measurement of success needs to observe the individual over time, as relapse might take time, and disengagement might lead to disengagement from ideologically induced violence, but not crime.

*Thirdly*, many programmes are evaluated based on their internal success criteria, which in some cases also include criteria of lesser importance, such as including meeting frequencies and procedures. We will in some cases have self-referential measurements, where the organisation in question defines the benchmarks on which it is to be measured, and fulfils them.

*Fourthly*, the families and outside networks are often left alone when the success rate is supposed to be measured, excluding an important source of information.

*Fifthly*, the conceptual discussion around disengagement and deradicalisation also influences how success is defined: is it to be non-violent behaviour, or should it be ideological change?
As suggested by Jessica Stern and Paige Pascarelli in this volume, a common approach to evaluation is urgently needed. Unfortunately, it is also a fact that another point highlighted by various contributors to this book – the need for individually tailored programmes – seemingly makes standardised approaches harder. Here there is a dilemma for future studies.

This book does however suggest that some lessons from criminology can be adapted. Hansen and Gielen, for example, both suggest that methods for measuring delinquency, including lifespan studies, are examples to be referred to, and Hansen highlights that discussions over measurements within delinquency studies hold much value for individuals who want to evaluate deradicalisation/disengagement programmes, although many factors intervening in forming behaviour over a lifespan cannot be controlled for.

Another challenge seen in this book is the limited access researchers have to information and the dependency on the willingness to share information by those in charge of the programmes, which in some cases restrict basic knowledge of the practice and the possibilities of learning from each other what are and what are not promising strategies.

Issues of coordination are also pressing. Coordination and definition of responsibility of the involved actors become important to achieve success. Multi-agency initiatives are developed in many countries to address these challenges. Yet, as illustrated by Lid in the chapter on local government, expanded cooperation might create some unforeseen consequences, especially if involving law enforcement and military state institutions. Close cooperation between local government and law enforcement and military state institutions can potentially increase scepticism among target groups of various deradicalisation and disengagement efforts towards local governments. That can hamper social service provision to these groups. This highlights some dilemmas. For example, should social and health institutions assist the police and intelligence services to collect information locally? Moreover, how to create trusting relations between the social/health workers and the former extremist in a field where surveillance and security are prominent becomes an important question. The increased number of actors creates a great need to clarify roles, area of responsibility and tasks, in addition to transparency and clear procedures in partnership.

There are also examples in this book of problems that have been overlooked, such as the agency of the radical organisation from which individuals are to be disengaged/deradicalised. In many cases, if you act against an organisation (to encourage defections), the organisation will act against you. Of course, the radical organisation will vary in capacity and strength from case to case. Nonetheless, countermeasures from radical organisations have often been underestimated, as illustrated by the examples drawn from Camp Bucca in the chapter by Stern and Pascarelli, but also in David Webber, Marina Chernikova, Erica Molinario and Arie W. Kruglanski’s contribution, as well as Hansen’s two chapters. The toolbox available to organisations that want to thwart the effects of disengagement/deradicalisation programmes also remains understudied. Yet the editors of this book hope that the lessons of the re-education programmes of World War II and of Camp Bucca in Iraq, that radical organisations might create an organisational hierarchy inside prison camps and target individuals seen as vulnerable to deradicalisation and disengagement, do not need to be re-learned. Nevertheless, as Lihi Ben Shitrit suggests, designating prisoners as a part of an organisation will influence their self-identification, and enhance the organisation one wants to curtail. Perhaps the Spanish strategy for handling ETA – separating members of the organisation in different prisons – is a way forward, yet a lack of resources will also constrain such measures.
Another ignored topic is the lack of thinking around gender in disengagement and deradicalisation programmes, as well as the use of gender stereotypes. Eggert argues that the specific needs of women and men wanting to leave violent extremist organisations are overlooked, and more consideration on these issues is needed.

Perhaps the greatest question is that raised by Irina A. Chindea: what happens when the organisation from which individuals are to be deradicalised suddenly emerges as a partner in potential peace processes? This is perhaps best illustrated by the overtures between the Taliban and the United States at the time of writing. In the past the Taliban was seen as an organisation to be deradicalised and disengaged from, yet the same organisation is seemingly being offered the right to influence the curriculum in Afghan schools. In such processes transitional justice suffers; transitional justice process is focused less on bringing to justice the perpetrators of violence. Hence, former guerrilla and paramilitary members have not only been included in peace negotiations, but some of them also entered the political process at local and national level. The paradoxes of such transitions have not yet been thoroughly discussed within deradicalisation and disengagement programmes.

These challenges do not mean that disengagement/deradicalisation initiatives are doomed to failure. The evidence for positive effects is simply too wide to dispute. Yet, we have to ensure that the dilemmas are discussed, and that the lessons from the various efforts do not have to be re-learned. We have to be careful that the decline of the Islamic State and the reduction of mass migration of foreign fighters (and the increasing decline of returning fighters from the Islamic State who need to be reintegrated and deradicalised) or indeed, the potential weakness of the right-wing scene, and renewed focus on great power rivalry, will be mistaken for signs of us not needing deradicalisation/disengagement. Even if radicalism declines, it may come back: Gielen’s example in her chapter should be kept in mind (Chapter 16):

The Dutch national and local CVE programmes came to an end in 2012, because violent extremism was not considered a serious threat any more by security services … One year later the conflict in Syria led to Dutch citizens travelling to join terrorist organisations such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It was at that time, in March 2013, that the threat level had to be raised … and a new national CVE action plan … was developed.

This book hopes to provide an overview of the field, which could aid the transfer of knowledge to future deradicalisation and disengagement programmes, perhaps targeting radical groups that have not yet emerged, while also keeping a critical approach containing warnings of potential misuse.

Note

1 For example, one of the neo-Nazis interviewed by one of the editors highlighted how she had participated in a formal exit programme, without any effect, but was then deradicalised by colleagues approaching her at the bar where she worked (Lid, Winsvold, Soholt, Hansen, Heierstad & Klausen 2016).

Reference