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# Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists

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## Summary

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There is an emergent consensus among counterterrorism analysts and practitioners that to defeat the threat posed by Islamist extremism and terrorism, there is a need to go beyond security and intelligence measures, taking proactive measures to prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing and rehabilitating those who have already embraced extremism. This broader conception of counterterrorism is manifested in the counter- and deradicalization programs of a number of Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, and European countries.

A key question is whether the objective of these programs should be disengagement or deradicalization of militants. Disengagement entails a change in behavior (i.e., refraining from violence and withdrawing from a radical organization) but not necessarily a change in beliefs. A person could exit a radical organization and refrain from violence but nevertheless retain a radical worldview. Deradicalization is the process of changing an individual's belief system, rejecting the extremist ideology, and embracing mainstream values.

There is a view in the scholarly community that deradicalization may not be a realistic objective and that the goal of terrorist rehabilitation programs should be disengagement.<sup>1</sup> Deradicalization, in fact, may be particularly difficult for Islamist extremists because they are motivated by an ideology that is rooted in a major world religion. The tenets of the ideology, therefore, are regarded as religious obligations.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, John Horgan, "Individual Disengagement: A Psychological Analysis," in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, New York: Routledge, 2008.

Nevertheless, deradicalization may be necessary to permanently defuse the threat posed by these individuals. If a militant disengages solely for instrumental reasons, when the circumstances change, the militant may once again take up arms. Conversely, when deradicalization accompanies disengagement, it creates further barriers to recidivism.

Moreover, there may be a tipping point. When enough ex-militants renounce radical Islamism, the ideology and the organizations that adhere to it are fatally discredited. Even short of this tipping point, as greater numbers of militants renounce extremism, radical Islamist organizations will experience greater hurdles in attracting adherents and sympathizers within the Muslim community.

Studies of those who leave gangs and criminal organizations, exit from cults and religious sects, and withdraw from terrorist organizations suggest that individuals follow a similar trajectory when leaving a criminal or extremist group. Certain lessons can be derived from this trajectory.

First, it appears that it is important that efforts be made to facilitate the process of disengagement during the crucial early stages. Individual disengagement begins as a result of a trigger, often a traumatic or violent incident. Although these types of events can impel a person to leave a radical organization, if they are not exploited, they could strengthen the militant's commitment to the group. Therefore, whenever possible, an intervention should be attempted after traumatic events—for instance, a militant's arrest—that may precipitate a cognitive opening.

If extremists who are weighing the costs and benefits of staying or leaving could be identified, it may be possible to influence their strategic calculus. Since most of the rehabilitation programs for Islamist extremists are in prisons, it may be possible for the authorities to recognize conflicted inmates and encourage them to participate in the program.

Second, a government can take actions that make disengagement more attractive and continued extremist behavior less appealing by implementing counterterrorism measures that increase the costs of remaining in an extremist organization while strategically offering incentives that increase the benefits of exiting. Governments must be

cautious in calibrating their approaches, however. Repression alone often backfires and causes further radicalization; at other times, it can be an important measure that decreases the utility of remaining in a radical organization. It appears that a dual strategy—including both hard- and soft-line measures—is the best policy for inducing individuals to leave a militant group.

Third, while deradicalization programs focus on convincing jailed Islamist extremists to recant their beliefs, it is important that these programs continue to assist freed, rehabilitated individuals. In particular, the program should assist the ex-militant in finding a job and locating a supportive environment. In addition, it is prudent to require that the ex-militant continue counseling and to monitor his or her behavior and associations closely.

The probability that an individual will disengage or deradicalize appears to be inversely related to the degree of commitment to the group or movement. Commitment can be measured in terms of affective, pragmatic, and ideological bonds. Affective commitment is an emotional attachment to other members of the organization and to the group itself. Pragmatic commitment refers to the practical factors that make it difficult to exit a radical organization, such as material rewards and punishments. The ideological component justifies the actions that the militant is asked to take and the hardships that he or she must endure to achieve the group's objectives.

In this regard, leaving an ideologically based radical Islamist group is not the same as leaving a criminal group or a gang, an essentially nonideological entity. Leaving an Islamist group implies the rejection of a radical ideology or of essential parts of that ideology, particularly the individual obligation to participate in armed struggle. It follows that, even if a militant is inclined to leave the group for other reasons, the articulation of theologically grounded imperatives for renouncing violence by credible authorities is an important factor in catalyzing the decision to leave the group.

Most Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian programs employ a form of theological dialogue in which mainstream scholars and, sometimes, former radicals engage extremists in discussions of Islamic theology in an effort to convince the militants that their interpretation

of Islam is wrong. However, the content of the theological dialogue in such programs must be treated with caution. Because the priority of these governments is combating the domestic terrorist threat, the programs stress the unacceptability of terrorism domestically (on the basis that the government is Islamic or that the country is not under occupation), but they may condone it abroad in zones of conflict, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach might address the immediate security needs of the country in question, but it does not truly deradicalize the militants.

There are not enough reliable data to reach definitive conclusions about the short-term, let alone the long-term, effectiveness of most existing deradicalization programs. Many governments closely guard information about their programs and about the militants who have graduated from them. Moreover, the ostensibly good track record of some programs can be misleading because these efforts focus on reforming terrorist sympathizers and supporters, not hard-core militants. This has become increasingly apparent in light of the number of Saudi Guantanamo detainees who have returned to terrorism upon their release.

In contrast, there is more information on the content of European efforts to prevent radicalization, but it is difficult to measure the success of these programs because their effects are more diffuse. In some cases, such as the Slotervaart Action Plan in Amsterdam, measurable indicators to assess the success of the programs have not been developed, and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the effects of such programs on the exposure group.

It follows that our knowledge of deradicalization programs remains limited and that there are reasons to remain skeptical about the programs' claims of success. Nonetheless, our analysis has a number of policy implications. A key finding is that a deradicalization program should work to break the militant's affective, pragmatic, and ideological commitment to the group. Individuals may vary in the level of each type of commitment, but because it is prohibitively costly to tailor a program to each person, rehabilitation efforts should include components to address each type of attachment. None of these components is sufficient on its own, however. Deradicalization programs appear more

likely to succeed when all three components are implemented together so as to provide individuals with multiple reasons to abandon their commitment to the radical group and ideology.

## **Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Individual Rehabilitation Programs**

Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian governments have established prison-based individual rehabilitation programs that usually promote a particular state-sanctioned brand of Islam. The prototype of this approach was Yemen's theological dialogue model, which was based on the assumption that most militant Islamists do not have a proper understanding of Islam and therefore can be reeducated and reformed.<sup>2</sup> Since these nations (with the exception of Singapore) have explicitly Islamic governments or are Muslim-majority countries, the government is willing to become involved in matters of religious interpretation to promote an official version of Islam. Our examination of these programs has four key policy implications.

First, these efforts seem to hinge on the ability of the state to find credible interlocutors who can develop relationships with imprisoned militants and use their legitimacy and personal ties to convince the radicals of the error of their ways. Credibility may stem from the interlocutor's standing as a theologian, history as a former militant, or personal piety. Using interlocutors whom the militants respect and who are able to connect with the prisoners appears to be essential to establishing rapport with the detainees.

Second, deradicalization programs need to be balanced, with affective, pragmatic, and ideological components that continue after the prisoners have been released. It is clear that prison-based rehabilitation programs cannot rely solely on religious debates to reform detainees. Dialogue alone does not break militants' affective and practical ties to a radical movement or equip them with the skills that they need to

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<sup>2</sup> As discussed later, the exception to the theological dialogue model is Indonesia, which has no organized religious component.

become self-reliant, productive members of their community. Moreover, it is difficult to assess whether a militant has truly changed his or her beliefs (although, as discussed later, there are potential means of assessing a change in belief).<sup>3</sup> Since prisoners have an incentive to cooperate with the authorities to earn their freedom, it is best to create a situation that provides incentives for disengagement and disincentives to recidivism.

Third, to ensure that militants remain disengaged, deradicalization programs need to continue to monitor former detainees and offer extensive support after their release. In particular, aftercare should include locating the ex-radical in a supportive environment and facilitating his or her reintegration into society. The best-designed rehabilitation programs (for instance, the one in Singapore) continue to offer (and sometimes require) theological and psychological counseling for those who have been released. Continued interaction with a credible interlocutor provides ongoing emotional support, helps to dispel doubts, and ensures that behavioral and ideational changes endure.

Fourth, programs that include the militant's family appear to increase the probability that the individual will remain disengaged. Deradicalization programs may incorporate militants' families by offering practical support or counseling or by making them guarantors of the former radical's behavior. All of these are effective ways of investing the radical's family in his or her rehabilitation and making it likely that family members will urge the former radical to remain disengaged from extremism.

As noted earlier, the state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam being promoted in some rehabilitation programs often contains radical elements; in particular, some programs propagate the idea that violence at home is unacceptable but that violence in zones of conflict, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, is legitimate and necessary. This suggests that the United States should learn more about these programs before it

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, whether the prisoner shares credible information with the authorities, whether the prisoner attempts to persuade others to radicalize, whether the former extremist consistently and publicly denounces his or her former beliefs, and whether the former extremist remains disengaged.

agrees to repatriate militants currently held in U.S. detention facilities. The United States should also carefully consider all aspects of a deradicalization program before offering support. Finally, it should encourage states with deradicalization programs to provide more information about their efforts so that they can be better evaluated and improved.

## **Prison-Based Collective Deradicalization**

Collective deradicalization has occurred infrequently—only when a state has defeated an extremist organization by killing or imprisoning most of the group’s leaders. Collective deradicalization differs from the programs established to rehabilitate individual extremists in that states in which collective deradicalization has occurred have not established extensive, organized programs to rehabilitate imprisoned militants. Instead, governments have responded to overtures from a radical group’s leaders who have already begun to reconsider their positions and then engaged these leaders to facilitate their process of disengagement.

Our analysis of collective deradicalization has a number of implications for policymakers.

First, policymakers should encourage group deradicalization where it seems feasible and facilitate the public disclosure of the writings and arguments of militants who renounce extremism. Demonstration effects are one of the least discussed but most important aspects of deradicalization. When an influential ideologue or operational leader renounces an extremist ideology—and, more importantly, explains his or her reasons for so doing—it raises doubts in the minds of radicals who subscribe to a similar worldview. Because of the stature and credibility of some of the authors, these treatises pose the greatest and most serious challenge to the extremist ideology, which must be delegitimized to permanently remove the threat posed by radical Islamism. Extremists who are still at large will predictably argue that these recantations have been made under duress, so governments should avoid embracing the recanting extremists too closely in order to avoid compromising their credibility.

Second, governments must maintain a high level of international cooperation in suppressing terrorist groups. This is particularly important because Islamist extremist organizations are part of a global network that allows them to survive even if they have been defeated at home. Repression or, more accurately, effective containment of extremist groups is an essential antecedent condition to deradicalization. When a critical mass of a group's key leaders and members are imprisoned with little chance of being released, this hopeless situation precipitates a strategic crisis that is often followed by an ideological crisis. Experience has shown that a mixed strategy—one that relies on hard-line counterterrorism measures as well as soft-line measures—is the most effective way to encourage militants to disengage and deradicalize.

Third, most programs focus on reforming less committed radicals. Although it is extremely difficult to induce committed militants to renounce extremism, governments may want to target the more devoted militants—the activists and the “hard-core”—because these individuals have more influence on the rank and file. Collective deradicalization is the most efficient way to change the behavior and beliefs of a large number of militants at once and ultimately discredit the extremist ideology. Of course, some committed militants may be impervious to efforts to induce them to change. These recalcitrant individuals, or “irreconcilables,” may have to be segregated from other group members to prevent them from impeding the rehabilitation of other inmates. However, if some leaders or influential militants show some indications of openness to alternative ideas, it would be advisable to include them in deradicalization programs.

## **European Counter-Radicalization and Voluntary Deradicalization Efforts**

European governments have taken a very different approach to combating Islamist extremism compared to that of governments in the Muslim world. In particular, most European states have been very reluctant to become involved in religious matters and therefore do not directly challenge the extremist ideology. Moreover, rather than

attempting to rehabilitate imprisoned militants, European governments have emphasized policies aimed at countering radicalization by enhancing social cohesion and the integration of their Muslim populations, as well as small, voluntary deradicalization programs for young people who are at risk of radicalization but have not yet broken the law. Based on our examination of these efforts, we have identified three policy recommendations.

First, governments must carefully select their partners in the Muslim community to ensure that they are working with authentic voices with grassroots support and not those who promote values contrary to liberal democracy. This is a difficult task, and many European governments have been reluctant to pick and choose partners within their Muslim populations. However, it is not clear that simply promoting democratic and national values, which is the approach that some European governments have taken, is sufficient to ward off radicalization. These governments may need to identify moderate Muslim intermediaries and strengthen these groups to enable them to compete with extremists in the war of ideas. Of course, there is a risk that extremists will attempt to discredit moderates as government tools. As we discussed in an earlier RAND publication, the key question is not whether but *how* governments should channel their assistance and engage prospective partners effectively. Assistance must be channeled in ways that are appropriate to local circumstances and, to the extent possible, involve nongovernmental organizations with existing relationships in the community.<sup>4</sup>

Second, although the voluntary deradicalization programs that some European states have created need to protect the privacy of their participants, these efforts must be critically evaluated. Therefore, baselines and benchmarks need to be established and data collected to permit independent assessments of the programs' effectiveness. If it is found that locally directed interventions are successful, the programs should be expanded. But their effectiveness needs to be verified first.

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<sup>4</sup> Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Peter Sickle, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-574-SRF, 2007.

Third, given the increasing severity of the problem of Islamist radicalization and recruitment in prisons, European governments may want to consider establishing prison deradicalization programs. The secular character and legal systems of European states make it difficult to emulate some of the practices of prison-based rehabilitation programs in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, but there may be experiences in the case of Singapore, a secular, non-Muslim-majority state facing challenges similar to those confronted by European countries, that are relevant to the European context.

## Final Observations

Culture matters. As this monograph shows, the deradicalization programs that we studied all reflect the social and cultural characteristics of the countries in which they have been implemented. The best-designed plans leverage local cultural patterns to achieve their objectives. One implication of this observation is that deradicalization programs cannot simply be transplanted from one country to another, even within the same region. They have to develop organically in a specific country and culture.

That is not to say that best practices cannot be identified. When they appear to be successful, deradicalization programs have been comprehensive efforts that break extremists' affective, pragmatic, and ideological commitment to a radical organization and worldview. This is a very difficult and expensive undertaking that does not guarantee success. Some states—Yemen, for instance—may not have the means to implement a comprehensive program. In other cases, there may be legal or political obstacles that prevent a government from developing programs that intrude on the religious sphere.

Disengagement and deradicalization programs will likely remain a necessary part of larger counter-radicalization and counterterrorism strategies. However, governments cannot afford to be naïve or careless when seeking to rehabilitate extremists. To succeed, deradicalization programs must be extensive efforts that include affective, pragmatic, and ideological components and considerable aftercare. Prison-based

deradicalization programs, in particular, need to exercise caution, carefully evaluating each individual before release and implementing safeguards, such as monitoring, to protect against the eventuality that former militants could once again take up arms.