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# REINTEGRATING EXTREMISTS: 'DERADICALISATION' AND DESISTANCE



What is the most appropriate way of ensuring that returnees from the conflict in the Middle East do not go on to carry out attacks in the UK? Likewise, as those convicted of terrorism offences in the UK continue to be released into the community at the end of their sentence, how do we ensure their positive transition into mainstream society?

For the past 10 years I've been looking at efforts to engage with those involved in extremism. Based on extensive interviews and fieldwork with practitioners working with militant Islamists in the UK, I have proposed a framework for interpreting involvement in extremism and examined what supports disengagement.

Rather than broad based process models informed by particular risk factors, such as victimisation or grievance, I argue that involvement in extremism can be understood as a way of securing particular types of goods in ways that break social norms.

## SO WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS ARGUMENT FOR SUPPORTING THE MOVE AWAY FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Knowledge about what causes the move away from violent groups is not well developed, nor is the field clearly conceptualised. The most commonly used terms are 'deradicalisation', usually taken to mean attitudinal change indicating reduced support for violent extremism, and disengagement, generally taken to mean behavioural change. It is often assumed that one leads to the other.

However, these terms are problematic, in part because the link between attitude and behaviour is not straightforward: many more people hold 'radical' views than actually engage in violence.

Similarly, there is a growing consensus that process based accounts – so-called 'conveyor belt' models of 'radicalisation' and 'deradicalisation' – lack strong evidence. Rather than a sequential process, disengaging from violent groups is a heterogeneous, dynamic and highly individualised experience. Finally, 'deradicalisation' focuses too much attention on questions of individual psychology and ideology, neglecting the wider

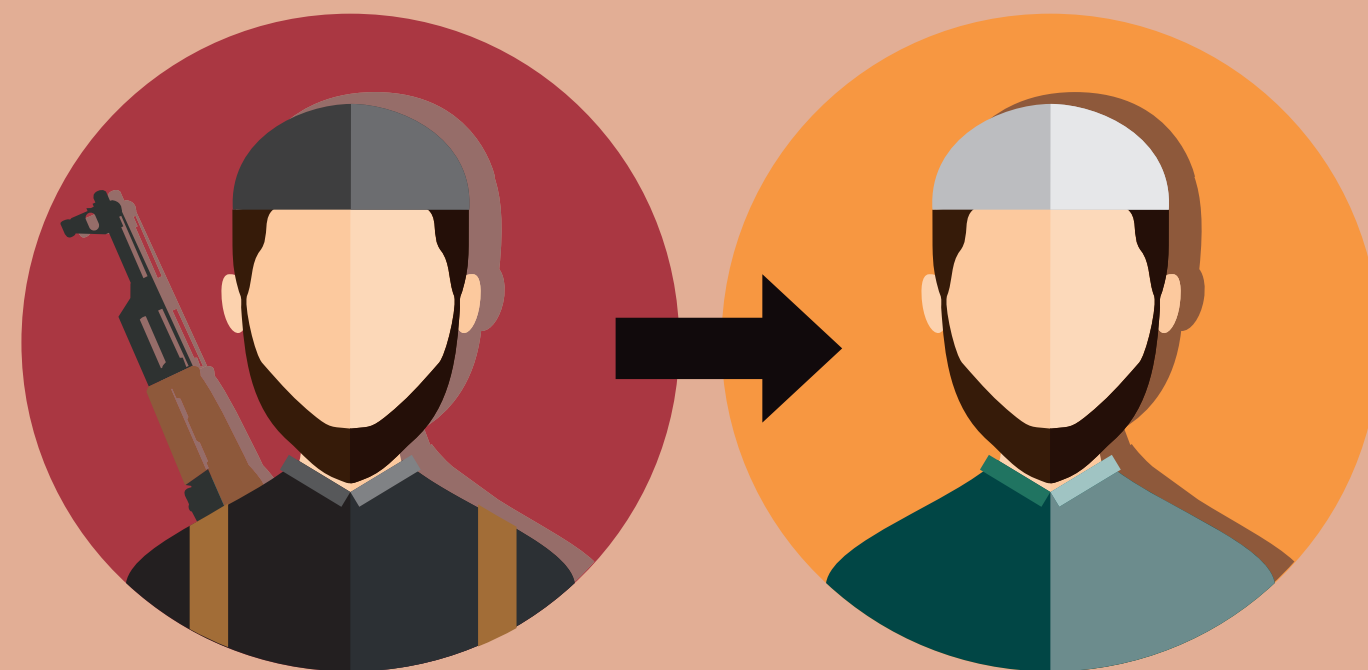
social, political and community context in which the individual is embedded.

For these reasons, reintegration seems a more appropriate framework for interpreting the move away from violent groups and transition back into society.

Intervention programmes to move people away from violent groups have been initiated across the world. Most are delivered by statutory agencies, although some use community-based actors. Although varied, interventions typically combine one or more of the following: efforts to address ideological issues; offering psychological or counselling for those traumatised by violence; improving the individual's socio-economic situation, for example providing jobs or education; or supplying wider social support, for instance to the prisoner's family.

However, we know relatively little about how effective these intervention programmes are as few have been independently evaluated. In the UK, the Probation Services and the National Offender Management Service have developed some expertise in this area, involving in-house intervention packages and community mentors supporting the work of Offender Managers.

It is extremely difficult to interpret the likelihood of someone re-engaging with a violent group following an intervention, and we lack a clear understanding of what 'success' looks like in this context. In the criminal justice system, the dominant model with non-extremist offenders assesses risk based on empirically validated factors linked to the likelihood of reoffending. However, these have proven inadequate for those involved in violent extremism, as the risk factors are very different.



Alternative frameworks for assessing risk with politically motivated offenders have been developed, but these are relatively new and demand much further evaluation and exploration. More generally, the risk paradigm has been criticised for neglecting the contextualised, embedded nature of people's lives, focusing too heavily on particular risk profiles. One consequence of this focus on risk is that interventions are less attractive to prisoners, neglecting issues of personal motivation.

An alternative framework – the desistance or strengths based approach – has been found useful in interpreting existing work with those convicted of terrorism offences in the UK. This assumes we are all motivated to pursue a number of goods, for example, positive relations with others and the wider community, achievement through work, and a meaningful sense of personal agency. Further, that the most appropriate way of achieving these goods is informed by the ideological setting the individual is embedded in.

By implication, extremism is inspired by the same drive to address common human needs we all share. The difference is the ideological framework the individual is committed to and how this informs how particular goods might be achieved, alongside practical enablers that make this possible.

If engagement in extremism involves pursuing goods in ways that break social norms, disengagement can be interpreted as a growing commitment to achieving goods in ways society deems acceptable. To support desistance, it is therefore important to facilitate sustainable, pro-social ways of achieving goods.

This involves redirecting, rather than necessarily deconstructing the initial motivation to become involved in extremism. For example, if someone is primarily motivated by a desire to help their co-religionists, finding ways of doing this in pro-social rather than illegal ways is likely to support long term disengagement.

It is also important to develop resilience to people and events that might undermine any growing commitment to disengage. In this way, it is possible to support the reintegration of those involved in extremism into society. There are several implications of these arguments:

- As well as focusing on risk assessment measures, identifying the goods people seek to pursue is an important part of learning how to support an individual, facilitate successful outcomes, and determine if progress is being made.
- Identifying credible change agents that are able to model appropriate routes to personal fulfilment and who can support the individual as they pursue them.
- Rather than a causal factor, ideology is perhaps best understood as a framework that determines what is important, and how goods should be pursued. Ideological change is less relevant to public protection than ensuring goods are pursued in legal ways. People should therefore be treated holistically, taking account of their social, political, cultural and community context, as well as addressing ideas and beliefs.
- Recognising the barriers to reintegration and disengagement is vital. Even where an individual is motivated to disengage, they face significant challenges: finding a job, developing a new social network, or even getting a bank account can be problematic. Acknowledging society's role in supporting reintegration is therefore central to supporting successful long-term desistance.

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