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De-radicalization Programs and Counter-terrorism: A Promising Agenda?

Europe's de-radicalization programs are being increasingly securitized at the highest policy levels. Although Daniel Kohler thinks that this trend is understandable and overdue, he also worries that it may undermine some of the programs' counterterrorism functions.

By Daniel Koehler for ISN

In January 2014 the European Commission led by Cecilia Malmström released a 10-point action plan to counter radicalization and violent extremism within the European Union. In the 10 recommendations for all EU member states, the Commission chose to include the development of de-radicalization programs ("exit strategies") for every member state. For the first time these programs – which were previously seen as "soft" and "low key" social work endeavours – were brought into high-level policy oriented counter-terrorism debates, suggesting that these programs had strategic value at this level. While de-radicalization and reintegration programs are nothing new, their strategic use in counter-terrorism certainly is. Indeed, closer examination shows that, in addition to their social and civil society components, de-radicalization programs could play a crucial role in efforts to contain or counter terrorist threats. While the effects will depend on a number of variables, academic and political debate regarding the strategic value of de-radicalization programs – especially since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war – seems to have partially shifted towards incorporating them into security debates and national security architectures. Although understandable and overdue, this securitization of de-radicalization might nevertheless put certain counter-terrorism functions of these programs at risk.

The strategic value of de-radicalization programs in counter-terrorism

As de-radicalization programs by definition work with individuals or groups that are involved in radical social movements, terrorist organizations, or clandestine political, religious or ideological violence, it is clear that these programs operate at the intersection between security agencies and civil society. De-radicalization programs start at the 'security side' (e.g. with individuals that are actively involved in terrorist groups) and aim to end on the 'civil society side' (i.e. successful reintegration). While genuine security matters call for the involvement of governmental institutions and agents (e.g. when terrorists or the leaders of radical groups want to leave these organizations behind, or when families of individuals travelling to or from Syria ask for help), other elements of de-radicalization programs, such as the promotion of a democratic culture or the dismantling of radical ideologies, can be effectively tackled by civil society organizations. Studies of different types of actors in

[de-radicalization work show](#) that both sides (governmental and non-governmental) have their advantages and disadvantages and that no 'one size fits all' approach exists. [Innovative public-private-partnerships have also yielded promising results in overcoming structural discrepancies](#).

In the area of counter-terrorism, however, only a few scholars (see [here](#) and [here](#)) have attempted to analyse the value of de-radicalization programs. There are four core elements of any well designed de-radicalization program with specific counter-terrorism value. First, every individual that leaves a radical milieu reduces the manpower of radical groups and is prevented from radicalizing further or committing crimes. Especially when these persons leave high-level hierarchies, or take a considerable amount of (technical and social) knowledge with them, the radical group has to commit resources to recruit and train replacements and to regain the knowledge and skills lost. In many forms of political violence, individual 'entrepreneurs', group leaders and skilled activists are essential to keep the group running and capable of performing acts of violence. Removing key individuals can massively set back the group or even cause its collapse.

Second, beyond their value in providing support for individuals leaving radical groups or a life of crime and violence, de-radicalization programs can have a substantial effect on radical milieus. The departure of members, in particular, can cause a group to deteriorate. In addition to forcing a group to commit resources to finding adequate replacements, gaps in a group's hierarchy can undermine trust and traditions within the group. Out of a need to explain the loss of a former comrade the group can experience 'explanatory drift' as a result of defection, which may prevent it from establishing unbroken traditions and reproducing itself as an organization. This can then lead to structural reorientation that carries high institutional costs in terms of recruitment, training and inclusion – all caused by the void left by the former member or members. These structural costs can substantially harm the development of a group or even cause it to collapse. Even if the group is successful in replacing the former member, the event still needs to be contextualized and explained to the remaining active members. The normal reaction will be to dismiss the former member as corrupt, untrustworthy or psychologically unstable, as working for the enemy, being a traitor and so on. Even if this solves internal tensions and the immediate threat of subsequent defections, these explanations conflict with the fact that former members were previously accepted as part of the group, which means that neither the ideology nor the group itself was capable of detecting the deficiencies of that particular individual and/or turning the person into a loyal member. Every defection therefore reveals the possible failure of a group's ideology and internal coherence and demands significant efforts and resources to counter its effects. This is especially true for small groups.

Third, by providing insight into radicalization processes, behaviour, and recruitment strategies, de-radicalization programs might yield substantial knowledge to formulate more effective counter-radicalization and counter-narrative programs. Helping authorities to understand the mechanisms of group-specific radicalization and violence is essential to make other counter-terrorism policies more effective.

Fourth, besides contributing to knowledge regarding group processes and psychological pathways towards terrorism, de-radicalization programs might also yield valuable specific intelligence about radical groups. This aspect is very controversial among academics and practitioners as it asks the participants in de-radicalization programs to act as witnesses against their former groups, which raises the threat of retaliation, and can be a substantial psychological obstacle for individuals attempting to leave a radical milieu. Arguments in favour of this intelligence-gathering function insist on the importance of 'redemption' – i.e., for ex-members of radical groups to 'prove' their seriousness in leaving the milieu and taking responsibility for the past. This intelligence-gathering function also helps to explain why police and intelligence agencies tend to be interested in running their own de-radicalization programs. However, the question of whether an individual participant should be

considered a source of information that can be used against active radical milieus remains morally and practically controversial. After all, this aim may systematically undermine the trust de-radicalization programs need to establish with participants in the first place.

In addition, former radicals are typically among the most authoritative voices against radicalization and the narratives of radical groups. Workshops in schools; capacity-building for teachers, police officers, judges, prison and probation staff; and social workers with the 'inside' perspectives of former members can help to understand the logics of radicalization as well as to identify and react appropriately.

Future trends and challenges

Due to recent developments regarding the threat posed by foreign fighters returning from Syria and the recognition of the contributions de-radicalization programs have made worldwide, it is safe to say that these programs will be a cornerstone of future counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategies, especially within the EU. However, it is important to note that research and understanding about de-radicalization are still in their infancy. The most promising developments in the field include 1) specifically- designed family counselling programs that target the 'affective environments' of potential or active foreign fighters and returnees, and 2) public-private partnerships. The most significant challenges ahead include developing 1) common standards, definitions and concepts, and 2) developing tools and methods for evaluating the effect of de-radicalization programs on radical milieus. Future de-radicalization programs must also develop specialized training programs for counsellors that include the fundamentals of counter-terrorism, such as risk and threat assessment, the psychology of terrorism and clandestine political violence, the principles of national security, and the legal aspects of counter-terrorism.

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