

Chapter 3: Exit Strategies

Radicalisation and its culmination in terrorism represent a major threat to the security and stability of the world. Hence, academic literature and research on de-radicalisation has flourished in recent years, by identifying both (1) the shortcomings and limitations in EXIT experiences, and (2) the best practices and research on psychological and management factors that can lead to effective de-radicalisation and disengagement.

This chapter about the latest scholarly insights on de-radicalisation has been developed after a literary review of prominent academic findings, chosen for their coverage of the three different dimensions necessary to understand the process leading to radical behaviour and ultimately violent extremism, and how to adequately counter them when designing of an EXIT strategy.

The chapter is organized in the following sections:

- (1) Main concepts for radicalisation and de-radicalisation studies
- (2) Theoretical models for radicalisation: drivers, factors and facilitators
- (3) De-radicalisation, disengagement and EXIT strategies
- (4) Main research gaps in literature
- (5) Policy recommendations found in the literature review

(1) Main concepts and terminology for radicalisation/de-radicalisation studies

In *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, Alex P. Schmid attempts to establish a correct interpretation of concepts, such as extremism, radicalisation, de-radicalisation, dis-engagement and counter violent extremism. A conceptual background can also be found in *Leaving the World of Hate Life-Course Transitions and Self-Change* by Bryan F. Bubolz and Pete Simi.

Alex Schmid points out the need for clarification about the terminology of radicalisation/de-radicalisation/dis-engagement as ‘any weakness in our conceptualisation and understanding of radicalisation is also likely to affect our comprehension of de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation’ and, therefore, any EXIT strategy will be conditioned by such a weakness. The lack of clarity is one of the main obstacles to building up the cumulative and comparative knowledge necessary to draw up valid policy recommendations. For instance, de-radicalisation often appears to be understood as any effort aimed at preventing radicalisation from taking place while some authors conceive de-radicalisation programmes as directly designed for individuals who have become radicalised with the aim of reintegrating them into

society. There is also no consensus about how to pursue a correct proper strategy: to de-radicalise, meaning to counter radical beliefs (individual-psychological approach), or to disengage, aimed at putting an end to violence while leaving the radical mind-set unchanged. However, some effort has been put into categorising the factors relevant to de-radicalisation (rejection of ideology, rejection of violence, evidence of failing violent strategies...), disengagement (disillusion with leadership, organisation and strategy, shift in ideology, imprisonment or personal projects outside the movement...) and, finally, to resilience or protective factors (personal environmental influences, such as family or partners, support for violence in public opinion, changes in the perception of others and social integration).

Like the concept of radicalisation, the term de-radicalisation is plagued by ambiguity, confusion and similar difficulties of operationalisation (Horgan, 2008; Sageman, 2011). Although the study of de-radicalisation is important, the process of how individuals and groups move away from violent extremism has received substantially less attention than studies that focus on radicalisation. Although there is relatively less attention placed on the process of de-radicalisation, studies have recently begun addressing the underlying mechanisms that facilitate changes in cognition and group attachment. De-radicalisation from violent extremism refers to a reduction in the commitment to extremism and a change in beliefs that conforms to mainstream values (Bjoro, 1997; Bjoro & Horgan, 2009; Blazak, 2004; Cohen & Ballou, 2012; Gadd, 2006; Horgan, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Kruglanski, Gelfand & Gunaratna, 2010; Messner, 1997; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez & Boucek, 2010). Much of the focus on de-radicalisation has been on changing beliefs to reduce the likelihood of a re-engagement in violent behaviour (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

Disengagement can be defined as ‘the process of withdrawing from the normative expectations associated with a role, the process whereby an individual no longer accepts as appropriate the socially defined rights and obligations that accompany a given role in society’ (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 3).

(2) Theoretical models for radicalisation: drivers, factors and facilitators

In this section we analyse the following papers:

- Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi & Rohan Gunaratna (2014), ‘The Psychology of Radicalization and De-radicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism’, *Advances in Political Psychology*, vol. 35, suppl. I.
- Michelle Dugas & Arie W. Kruglanski (2014), ‘The Quest for Significance Model of Radicalization: Implications for the Management of Terrorist Detainees’, *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, vol. 32, nr 3, p. 423-439.
- Froukje Demant & Beatrice de Graaf (2010), ‘How to Counter Radical Narratives:

Dutch De-radicalization Policy in the Case of Moluccan and Islamic Radicals’,
Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, nr 33, p. 408-428.

Such articles comprise different approaches to understanding the radicalisation process, from an individual-based approach (cognitive framework) to socio-communicative agent-based models. Their findings explore cognitive factors in the personal motivations of an individual towards extreme behaviour. The research also identifies certain hinge points that can be found and directly approached in an individual de-radicalisation programme.

Kruglanski *et al.* develop a socio-cognitive model focused on ‘the quest for significance’ at the individual, group and ideology levels. The authors identify three crucial components in the process of fostering radicalisation: (1) the motivational component (the quest for personal significance) that defines a goal to which one may be committed; (2) the ideological component, that additionally identifies the means of violence as appropriate for the goal’s pursuit; and (3) the social process of networking and group dynamics through which the individual comes to share in a violence-justifying ideology and proceeds to implement it as a means of gaining significance.

The authors present individual motivations as a goal-activation process characterised by: (1) an element of grievance; (2) a culprit for such a grievance; and (3) a moral justification. Therefore, some ideologies consider terrorist acts as morally acceptable and thus adequate for achieving important goals. The ‘quest for significance’ model interprets the individual search for self-meaning as a final goal. Honour, rewards in the afterlife and revenge are some of the most important gains that an individual pursues in order to achieve a sense of respect, to ‘matter’ to ‘someone’. Extremists in prison facilities have experienced a loss of significance, humiliation and personal failure or disrespect towards their community (whether Palestinians, Iraqi/Afghan/Syrian refugees, Muslims as a whole, etc.). Therefore, such acts of violence and terrorism pursue fame and recognition, or significance gain.

Ideology also plays a role in the radicalisation process when it is presented as a belief system that group members subscribe to and that identifies radical activity (such as violence and terrorism) as the means of choice to reach the goal of personal significance. Although some scholars, like Sageman, consider ideology less important than social bonds, from this cognitive perspective both ideology and bonds are not mutually exclusive. Social bonds can be considered a connector that brings individuals into contact with ideology, a world view shared by the community.

As the authors mention, it is important to distinguish between a terrorism-justifying ideology and a general value system. The support for specific values and practices (stoning as punishment, female ablation or amputating hands for theft) that Western culture may consider cruel or abhorrent should not be mistaken for support for terrorism. Is not clear whether this moral dilemma is or not directly linked to counterterrorism or de-radicalisation’s issues.

Finally, when individuals experience a loss of significance they tend to gravitate towards a group sharing core beliefs to restore significance by redressing the presumed injustice, dealing with a common enemy and highlighting the grievance suffered by the group as a legitimation for their acts and beliefs. Authors present evidence from studies showing that people who fail in life are more disposed to embrace an ideology (nationalistic, social, religious...). Failure seems not only to shift an individual's mindset away from an independent to an interdependent way of thinking, but it also fuels his efforts to engage in collective action. Some studies give further details about how self-identification with a group might trigger empowerment, sacrifice or encouragement to fight against the group's enemies.

The model proposed by Demant is based on a socio-communicative approach at the macro level that identifies factors promoting radicalisation in the communicative interaction between government and radicalised groups. In their 'demand and supply model', Demant & de Graaf propose a model of demand-supply interaction: 'demand' for action needs a 'supply' of radical repertoires. When the two meet, radicalisation and conflict arises, both at the micro level –the individual– and at a macro level –a given group, community, etc.–.

Government actions can be an important factor in the rise or decline of a radical movement. The government can send a message to a radical group by its actions (infiltration operations, arrests, convictions, public speeches, etc.) by providing a given narrative legitimising its action. The latter can play a role as 'signifiers', used by the radical group to confirm their own narrative ('legends') or the radical roots of their ideology. That is why it is extremely important for governments to plan the communication frameworks of their activities and actions so they cannot be misinterpreted and exploited by a radical group for its goals.

Therefore, at a macro level, a government's action may affect an extremist/terrorist, or already radicalised behaviour by 'supplying' signifiers or legends to a given radical group or individual, and thus foster radicalisation. If its policies match the legends (narratives) used by a given group, it can justify the latter's narratives: (1) by its discourse –fostering moral panic, with military metaphors such as 'we are at war'–; and (2) by its policies, since a hard line can foster jihadist stories of injustice and repression which can then lead to radicalisation (Demant & de Graaf).

Given the 'signifiers' and 'legends' that foster radical movements (Demant & de Graaf), the third key concept is that of 'neutralisers'. In a de-radicalisation strategy, the radical legends should be prevented or moulded into a less or non-radical story, undermining existing legends and neutralising the injustice frames that legitimise a radical ideology. By the use of such 'neutralisers', legends can be attenuated. Therefore, the demand and supply side of the radical movement is challenged by the design of an adequate communication plan. The Dutch experience with managing Moluccan terrorism in the 1970s poses certain similarities with the current Islamic case: both Moluccan and Islamic radicals share an identity as second-generation immigrants, an ethnic-minority feeling of exclusion from Dutch society. Both groups legitimised their radicalism through solidarity with and frustration over their compatriots, at home and abroad.

Moluccans were identified through kinship and current radicalised Muslims through religion. The lessons learned from the Dutch government's actions show the effectiveness of combining the repression of violent terrorist acts with the simultaneous offer of new possibilities for engagement and integration.

(3) De-radicalisation, disengagement and EXIT strategies

This section identifies the main findings in this type of literature, including:

- Bryan F. Bubolz & Pete Simi, 'Leaving the World of Hate Life-Course Transitions and Self-Change'.
- Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'Promoting EXIT from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches'.
- Froukje Demant & Beatrice de Graaf, 'How to Counter Radical Narratives: Dutch De-radicalization Policy in the Case of Moluccan and Islamic Radicals'.
- John Horgan & Max Taylor, 'Disengagement, De-radicalization and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research'.
- Fernando Reinares, 'Exit From Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement and De-radicalisation Among Members of ETA'.
- Rohan Gunaratna, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation: Genesis, Genealogy and Likely Future'.

The literature reviewed focuses on EXIT approaches designed for different kinds of extremists groups –white supremacist hate groups, Salafist terrorists, ethno-nationalist groups (such as Dutch Moluccans) and Spanish ETA terrorists–. A clear division can be identified between different regional approaches –Middle Eastern, South Asian and European– as well as between direct or re-educational strategies and indirect or comprehensive strategies. Some examples of these are described in terms of narrative-building, policy-making and detainee management.

Based on a study about white supremacists, Bubolz & Simi focus on the concept of 'hate group' ('any organised group whose beliefs and actions are rooted in enmity towards an entire class of people based on ethnicity, perceived race, sexual orientation, religion or other inherent characteristic'). The study begins addressing the gap in EXIT studies and finds that the process of EXIT from white supremacist movements is facilitated, in part, through self-reflection resulting from contact with law enforcement and the experience of incarceration. Part of the self-reflection process involves a growing awareness that certain expectations associated with the movement, such as family, loyalty and unity (Bjoro, 1997; Blee, 2002; Schafer *et al.*, 2014; Simi & Futrell, 2010), are not as genuine as originally expected.

Under the 'Quest for Significance Model' (Dugas, Kruglanski, Gelfand, Bélanger, Sheveland, Hetiarachchi & Gunaratna), de-radicalisation can be tackled by directly

addressing the loss of significance that led to an extremist behaviour in the first place: justifications and grievances (injustice, harm, identification with a specific group's suffering –such as Palestinians, Chechen black widows, the perception of disrespect against Muslim communities–...). Since the significance gain is pursued and obtained through group engagement –camaraderie and social support–, substitutes must be found by providing friendship groups, isolating the individual from the group and re-engaging with the communities at large.

To understand the decline and dissolution of radical groupings, the focus should be on the interaction between radicals and their organisations. In their 'demand and supply model', Demant & de Graaf identify the following factors that lead to the failure and decline of radical movements/sympathisers:

- On the 'supply side' (the radical movement): (1) ideologies losing their appeal; (2) ideologies losing their power of persuasion (with militants doubting strategies and methods); and (3) failures in the group's organisational structure (through weak, non-inspirational leadership or lack of adaptation to evolving circumstances).
- On the 'demand side' (the sympathisers): (1) the absence of new recruits (with a loss of the group's appeal to new generations); and (2) an evolving context that influences the movement's dynamics (political, cultural, social or economic).

Due to these different approaches, models such as 'cognitive dissonance' and 'reactance theory' (Dalgaard-Nielsen) must be taken into account to prevent possible shortcomings when designing measures for prison-detainee de-radicalisation-EXIT programmes:

- Cognitive dissonance is the resistance of an extremist to a direct revision of his point of view or to a direct attempt at influencing his attitudes.
- Reactance theory is the boomerang effect leading to a strengthening rather than a weakening of the attitude that is challenged. As people try to protect their freedom to think, they act and believe as they like, ie, fighting against perceived influences is a way of reasserting their freedom.

The South-Eastern and Middle-Eastern programmes, built upon ideological re-education, do not seem advisable. Instead, a programme that attempts to influence the EXIT candidate in a more subtle and less overt manner may be more appropriate (Dalgaard-Nielsen). Therefore, directly tackling the individual's point of view, visions or sets of beliefs as 'wrong' could lead to an even greater radicalisation. It might be more efficient to tackle the radical set of views with a rather more indirect approach: by properly trained counselling teams acting as agents of intervention, who should have an affinity with the target as 'significant ones' (relations or those with common friends or common background or interests), able to enhance trust. Also, agents should enjoy some authority in the radicalised individual's community or in a certain field of knowledge, have a high social status in a relevant social group or embrace values shared by the target. To achieve such an aim, specifically-trained social workers and personnel as

counsellors are key actors for success, for both reasons: (1) for their necessary interaction with the radicalised; and (2) for identifying the most adequate community leaders to cooperate within and outside of prison. Some appropriate practices are: (a) tackling clusters of doubts (Dalgaard-Nielsen); (b) using the period of imprisonment as an opportunity for self-reflection, an opportunity to ‘start again’; (c) weakening ties and isolating the person from the radical focus (Bubolz & Simi), etc. To sum up, to foster social influence based on cognitive and environmental context may be the most efficient pathway for de-radicalisation/EXIT processes.

Experiences with detainees

Practices of de-radicalisation developed in prisons are of paramount importance for EXIT strategies. Significant numbers of people convicted for terrorism and violent acts in relation with extremist and radical ideologies are held in prison facilities. Therefore, an effective management of extremists who are detained in prison arises both as a challenge and an opportunity: extremist detainees afford a good chance to pursue de-radicalisation-EXIT processes through specific programmes. To rehabilitate convicted terrorists and extremists, governments and their partners have developed several modes of rehabilitation.

Some of the theoretical models for de-radicalisation mentioned above provide clues about the management of terrorist detainees. The ‘Quest for Significance Model’ (Dugas & Kruglanski) emphasises that the loss of significance experienced by incarcerated individuals. Due to the fact that terrorist prison inmates tend to be treated differently from other inmates (isolation, close monitoring), potentially harmful consequences have been identified. The humiliation entailed in criminal justice processes, imprisonment and disempowerment may trigger the need to reaffirm one’s significance (having experienced a loss) and, therefore, promote a heightened extremism (attracted by ideologies that offer a stable vision of the world, clear guidance and a ‘black and white’ worldview). The self-uncertainty generated by detainment, imprisonment and deprivation of freedom leaves inmates vulnerable to continued and further radicalisation. Hence, it is necessary to design strategies aimed at restoring a sense of significance.

The ‘Clusters of factors that cause doubts’ model (Dalgaard-Nielsen) is a cognitive approach based on the different experiences of de-radicalisation policies in prisons of individuals convicted for terrorist offences. Since the individual is the key target of disengagement policies, and therefore of scholarly research, three different clusters of doubts have been identified: (1) doubts related to militant ideology (focused on narratives); examples have been found in separatist/nationalist groups (mentioned in Fernando Reinares) and extreme right-wing groups where the failure of violence to obtain the group’s goals has instead led to isolation and marginalisation; (2) doubts triggered by group or leadership failure, as those experienced by certain right-wing extremist, militant Islamist and extreme left groups; self-seeking, manipulative, cowardly or incompetent, materialistic or non-egalitarian leaders who enjoy privileges for themselves only or leaders that sell out the group when apprehended by authorities, or those who target and kill civilians or former members may trigger such doubts; and

(3) doubts triggered by personal and practical circumstances, such as burn-out, frontline fatigue, growing older, missing loved ones, longing for a normal life or feeling guilty. These doubts can be used to foster de-radicalisation/EXIT programmes, with a narrative-building perspective, by humanising the enemy, de-idealising violence, increasing contact with the world outside and focusing on poor leadership and/or personal practical issues.

Certain differences arise within regional-based approaches to EXIT from different sets of countries such as South Asia, the Middle East and Europe (Dalgaard-Nielsen; Gunaratna). South-East Asian and Middle Eastern programme for disengagement and rehabilitation, as well as the government policies carried out in prisons, mainly focus on ideological/theological re-education, by inculcating a correct interpretation of Islam and the Quran. Examples of these are the EXIT programmes developed by Saudi Arabia, Oman, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Afghanistan (Gunaratma). Nevertheless, European programmes focus more on psychological counselling and economic and formation assistance, while non-directly addressing the target's set of radical ideas or 'misconceptions' or their radical approach to Islam, as opposed to the practices employed in other areas. They prefer to encourage the target to find out by himself, therefore avoiding cognitive dissonance and the individual's rejection (Dalgaard-Nielsen).

Finally, the prison experience forces extremists to come into contact with other inmates who may be not related to their group, allowing the militants to see their narrative from the outside. A deeper and more solidary look at their ideological conviction can make them realise that their interpretation may have been misguided. Similarly, increased contact with the outside world, the passing of time and isolation from the group allows militants to reflect on the group's ideas, leading to the realisation of how implausible the militant narrative may be.

(4) Main research gaps in the literature

From this very short and limited review of the literature on EXIT/de-radicalisation it can be seen that knowledge of factors associated with violent radicalisation/de-radicalisation/disengagement is still limited but offers some insights into the numerous issues operating from the micro to the macro levels. However, only a minor part of the literature consists of empirical and/or causal research, which might explain the drivers or push factors to de-radicalise.

Understanding the process of de-radicalisation as a multidisciplinary endeavour means that it is more challenging to deliver results for such a complex phenomenon from a single perspective. Some models emphasise cognitive factors and the socialisation context but make no reference to other structural conditions (socioeconomic, political engagement, etc.). It is even more necessary than in other fields to improve the exchange of ideas between disciplines so that all can benefit from each other's insights. Overall, when there is no consensus in the conceptual area or is hampered by a lack of a

common terminology. Different disciplines may use the same word to mean different things or different words to mean the same thing. Harmonising the language used to describe key concepts will be essential to make results comparable.

Some researchers have carried out high-quality research in recent years, as this chapter shows. Government authorities who have greater access to violent extremists or terrorists through the intelligence sector or the justice system also carry out high-quality research, but their work is often classified and therefore does not tend to inform the wider public field of terrorism research. A greater transparency and an open-data strategy would be essential for developing de-radicalisation studies in the immediate future.

(5) Main findings and policy recommendations

From a psychological, cognitive perspective –of inmates in prison–:

- The psychology of radicalisation provides compelling reasons for the inclusion of de-radicalisation efforts as an essential component of the management of terrorist detainees (Dugas & Kruglanski).
- A concerted strategy should be launched to de-radicalise detainees and inmates in prison settings (Gunaratna).
- There is a need for ad hoc programmes and for structured programmes to be sustained in the long term. Some of the more crucial challenges faced by current rehabilitation programmes include monitoring recidivism, managing the transition for detainees ready to be reintegrated back into society and staying on top of the ever-changing terrorist narratives to counter them effectively when attempting to de-radicalise detainees (Gunaratma).
- The quest for significance model should be borne in mind when drafting de-radicalisation strategies in order to target the components of the significance quest (Dugas & Kruglanski).
- While significance loss cannot be eliminated from a prison experience, it must be tackled by presenting alternative ideologies: other means to achieve honour and significance as an alternative to the use of violence, showing that radical means are morally unacceptable or ineffective (or both) and re-directing motivation towards inclusion strategies that might include job/educational training (Dugas & Kruglanski).
- EXIT programmes should be as subtle as possible in order not to activate the cognitive defences of the potential exiter. On the other hand, an attack strategy should work when targeting already existing doubts (Dalgaard-Nielsen).
- To achieve this, the agent of intervention and the building of a trust bond to identify doubts are key elements. An external intervention should remain close to the potential exiters' doubts in as subtle a way as possible. (Dalgaard-Nielsen).

- Enrolling potential exiters while they are in prison, and using presumably credible go-betweens such as scholars, former extremists or family, as well as engaging in the community, are all advisable (Dalgaard-Nielsen).

From a sociological perspective:

- Government public action, speeches and acts in general must be adequately prepared so as not to foster radicalisation among communities –by providing legends and signifiers- but, on the contrary, should influence them in a positive way: (1) by its discourse, showing social resilience, ‘We will not be intimidated’; (2) by its policies, showing awareness of injustice and confronting these narratives to counter radicalisation. In sum, building social resilience, fostering online counter-extremism and promoting moderation are the main approaches that public actors must bear in mind when designing policies and public action (Froukje Demant, Beatrice de Graaf).
- Communities should be protected not only from extremist ideologies but also from detained and convicted terrorists released from prisons. Moreover, involvement in de-radicalisation-EXIT process may be as useful to help EXIT radicalised individuals as a preventive strategy in the medium-to-long term against polarisation and radicalisation (Rohan Gunaratna).
- The current capacity for insurgent rehabilitation and reintegration is limited to non-existent, but it would be useful to break the circle that leads to recruitment through the rehabilitation of insurgents and community engagement. For this, there is the need for a comprehensive strategy based on the integration of community engagement through rehabilitation: helping someone to return to normal life by providing education, training and therapy. A new set of beliefs in which violence and other extreme measures are unacceptable involves pursuing political goals and change that must be inculcated (Rohan Gunaratna).
- Support is needed from governments, NGOs, community organisations, and private and academic sectors to devise a comprehensive and inclusive de-radicalisation strategy.

From a narrative-building perspective:

- It is vital to identify ‘signifiers’ that are used or can be used by extremist discourses in their narratives to feed discontent amongst peoples and minorities capable of being individual targets of radicalisation. It is essential to counter the sense of alienation and exclusion (Demant & de Graaf).
- These should be adequately countered by creating alternative narratives to nullify extremist ones. For instance, social welfare should be addressed to resolve political issues such as offering activities to Moluccan youth, providing housing support, countering drug use and providing trainee programmes for students, while offering support for war victims (Demant & de Graaf).
- On the narrative side, ‘Clusters of doubt’ (Dalgaard-Nielsen) can lead extremists to

be disappointed and eventually leave the ‘cause’ because of their loss of faith in the militant narrative. There can be several reasons for leaving: (a) the central claim ceases to make sense; (b) the individual realises there are other points of view, different from those of the organisation/group; and (c) the individual confronts the actual consequences of violence (as an eye-opening, dramatic experience).