The strategic use of deradicalization

Mark Dechesne[1]

Abstract

The present contribution provides a recap of an earlier article entitled "Deradicalization: Not Soft but Strategic" (Dechesne, 2011). Building on the propositions that deradicalization is of strategic use, that it has existed for quite some time, that it may occur spontaneously, and that is should be differentiated from behavioral disengagement, a two-dimensional model of deradicalization is presented that differentiates between endogenous vs exogenous change and behavior vs. cognitive change, and depicts deradicalization as a process of cognitive change due to both endogenous and exogenous influences. The model is applied to various existing deradicalization programs leading to the propositions that 1) most of the European right-wing deradicalization programs focus more on behavioral than cognitive change, 2) there is insufficient insight in what motivates people to deradicalize; 3) psychological insights in belief change are insufficiently used to increase effectiveness of deradicalization. Cross-fertilization between social psychology and deradicalization may turn out to be of considerable strategic relevance.

[1] Senior Researcher University of Leiden; Centrum Regionale Kennisontwikkeling Den Haag

When deradicalization, the systematic attempt to bring extremists back to society with more moderate viewpoints, was labelled in 2008 by *Time Magazine* as one of the revolutionary ideas of the 21st century[i], it meant an explicit recognition of significant developments within the thinking regarding the ongoing "war on terror". As we are facing a diffuse threat, with no clearly identifiable enemy that is "out there", it has become obvious that 'kinetic' (i.e. lethal force) and otherwise punitive measures alone will not help to deal with the problem. Moreover, as terrorism, the use or the threat of violence in order to further social, political, or religious goals, is an inherently psychological phenomenon, a socio-psychological response, that includes preventing individuals at risk from radicalizing (counter-radicalization) and bringing radicals back to more moderate viewpoints (deradicalization), may ultimately turn out most effective.

In 2011, I published an article that essentially conveyed this message. It was termed "Deradicalization: not soft but strategic"[ii] to indicate that a move away from punitive or otherwise deterring counterterrorism measures not necessarily implies a more "soft" approach, but may actually prove most strategic as initiatives such as deradicalization may render us closest to the objective of reducing threats of further terrorist attacks. With the current wave of Jihadists returning from Syria, and the subsequent raising of the threat levels by counterterrorism agencies throughout Europe, the question of how to most effectively deradicalize is again of pertinence to address. This paper recaps my views on the topic, stemming from an analysis of existing deradicalization programs. I will provide some general observations, before repeating three propositions that I formulated in the "Deradicalization: not soft but strategic" article. These three propositions are of relevance up-to-this date. The notion that insights from psychology are insufficiently incorporated within the deradicalization programs remains particularly salient.

Things to know about deradicalization

Before getting into my propositions regarding deradicalization, it is perhaps good to make a couple of general remarks about the phenomenon.

First, it is important to stress the strategic nature of deradicalization. One of the greatest threats stemming from terrorism is that it creates a cycle of violence, whereby an initial attack by a terrorist organization is met with a violent counter-response, that may alienate parts of the population whose grievances the terrorist organization seeks to address, thereby fuelling support for the terrorist organization and providing the organization with potential new recruits and hideouts. This is what Clark McCauley[iii] has termed the "jiujutsu" dynamic of terrorism, whereby the strength of the target of a terrorist attack (in the case of terrorism often the government of a major power) turns into a disadvantage because it is excessively used in its response against a more flexible and agile opponent that can hide in a larger crowd, causing that each counter response is likely to miss its target, thus weakening the support base of the larger party and strengthening the support base of the terrorist organization. Deradicalization can be considered a strategic tool to break away from the "us versus them" distinctions and violent exchange associated with this "jiujutsu" politics.

Secondly, although deradicalization has been described as a revolution in counterterrorism strategy, it was labelled as such particularly to highlight the difference between deradicalization and the more military and repressive repertoire that was primary in the first years of the war on terror launched in 2001. However, the idea to deradicalize is by no means new. History is replete with examples of deradicalization practices[iv]. For example, the PLO sought to dismantle their notorious Black September wing by offering members compensation (including housing, and rewards for marriage and offspring). The British government also set up various programs, including vocational training, to improve the chances of detained IRA members within civil society, preventing them to return to the IRA and to continue with the armed struggle. In the Netherlands, a museum was built to provide the Moluccan community a space in which to document and reflect on Moluccan heritage in a non-militant fashion. It should also be noted that whereas deradicalization is considered inherently tied to terrorism, initiatives outside of the context of terrorism may bear striking resemblances and could potentially usefully inform deradicalization programs. Most notably, best practices from veteran care seem highly relevant[v], particularly those practices that were meant to deal with veterans of the opposing party. And even relation therapy, where cycles

of violence are not uncommon, has generated many useful insights and techniques to deal with radicalized relationships long before the emergence of the war on terror.

Thirdly, deradicalization can be a process that is both instigated from the inside as well as from the outside. This implies that deradicalization can occur spontaneously, without an intervention by an external actor. There are several reasons for why spontaneous deradicalization may occur. An individual may develop self-doubts about his or her abilities and motivation to make a meaningful contribution to a radical group. The group itself may also develop a destructive dynamic that may not serve the interests of the individual. And even in the absence of inward aggression, the actual experience of participating in a violent struggle may turn out disappointing relative to expectation. Terrorist organizations claim to act out of ideological motivations, but the actual practices may turn down those who joined the organization out of idealistic motivation. Tanja Nijmijer's discovered diaries[vi], describing the life of a young Dutch idealist hiding with other FARC members in the Columbian jungle, provides a telling example of the disappointment one could face when the surface of idealism of a terrorist organization is needled by the realities of internal strife, materialism, and sexism.

Fourthly, deradicalization pertains to the cognitive side of radicalism. It pertains to attitudes, values, and beliefs. The idea is that attitudes, values, and beliefs affect behavior, just as behavior may affect these cognitive components. But that doesn't mean that behavioral disengagement and cognitive deradicalization are the same. In fact, they may occur separately. Indeed, it is often noted that behavioral disengagement is much more common and easier to achieve than cognitive deradicalization[vii]. Simply putting someone in prison or shadowing and monitoring may make a member of a radical organization unable to carry out criminal acts, but this will probably not stop him or her from espousing radical ideas. Moreover, changes within a terrorist organization may force behavioral disengagement from radical acts, but this does not necessarily imply a change in beliefs. Thus, behavioral and cognitive changes may have different drivers. And this is critical to take into account when describing the nature and dynamics of deradicalization.

A two-dimensional depiction of deradicalization

Building on the observations just provided, in particular the third and fourth, deradicalization may formally be described using a two-dimensional structure, as depicted in Figure 1. Based on the notion that deradicalization may occur spontaneously but can also be induced from the outside, a first, endogenous-exogenous dimension, can be used to designate the locus of change. Endogenous changes result from the inside, either within the organization or the mind of the individual radical. Exogenous changes are brought about from the outside. A second dimension pertains to the distinction between behavioral and cognitive disengagement from extremist groups. Behavioral disengagement refers to the physical discontinuation of radical activities, and cognitive disengagement refers to the mental abandonment of extremist beliefs.

Figure 1: Two-dimensional structure of deradicalization
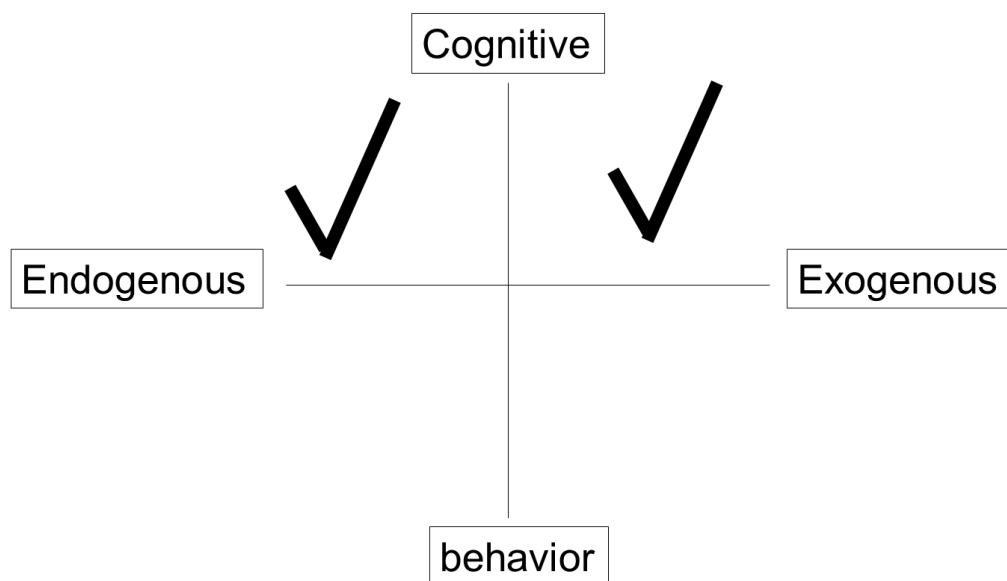
Deradicalization is considered to be the moderation of extremist beliefs rather than the discontinuation of extremist activities. As such, deradicalization occurs in the upper quadrants of Figure 1 rather than the lower quadrants. Deradicalization represents a strategic attempt to influence these beliefs, and the process of deradicalization thus pertains to the exogenous pole of the exogenous-endogenous dimension. At the same time, such exogenous influences are unlikely to spark cognitive change if the influence attempt does not resonate with an already active endogenous readiness for cognitive change. The

endogenous pole of the exogenous-endogenous dimension is therefore also relevant for deradicalization. Concurrently, deradicalization, the strategic influencing of extremist beliefs with the goal to establish more moderate viewpoints, implicates both the upper left and right quadrant of Figure 1. In practice, this means that deradicalization should be about 1) creating the circumstances under which extremists will become more open to alternative viewpoints (i.e. the upper-left quadrant) and 2) providing these alternative viewpoints through external influence (i.e. the upper-right quadrant).

Mapping this conceptual depiction of deradicalization onto current deradicalization practices has yielded three propositions regarding the current state of affairs of deradicalization programs[viii]. For this analysis, a number of publications on deradicalization programs were used[ix]. The programs under consideration were the EXIT programs in Europe set up to deal with right-wing extremists, and programs throughout Asia targeting (often imprisoned) Jihadis.

Proposition 1. *"Deradicalization" programs for the extreme right primarily target the behavioral aspects of involvement in an extremist organization. It is questionable whether these programs provide adequate insight into deradicalization.*

The EXIT programs in were set up to facilitate the exit from right-wing extremist groups. The programs have been implemented in several Scandinavian countries and Germany, with differences in setup depending on country. The key purpose behind the EXIT programs is to help individuals who are starting to have doubts about their affiliation with an extremist organization to find alternative pathways and return to society. There are various measures in place to facilitate this. Parents are involved to help detect signs of radicalization and indications of the intention to leave. Parents as well as government and law enforcement representatives are also involved in "serious conversations" to stress the repercussions of membership of an extremist organization. Of importance for the present discussion, the emphasis seems to be very much on negative implications of participating in an extremist environment whereas much less emphasis is put on prescribing the "right" way to live. Perhaps this is not surprising for initiatives within highly democratic societies, but it also

limits the possibilities for generalization of the EXIT programs for the understanding of deradicalization, as there seems to be limited attempt to externally influence thoughts into more moderate viewpoints. In this regard, the EXIT-Germany program has taken some promising steps, by also focusing on the cognitive components of exiting an extremist organization, and also by developing a broader knowledge base regarding deradicalization through its associated "Institute for the Study of Radical Movements".

Proposition 2. *There is insufficient insight into what motivates people to deradicalize*

A couple of years ago, Fareed Zakaria[x] had invited British media-savvy radical Anjum Chaudhary to engage in a dialogue, to illustrate the possibilities of deradicalization. In many Asian countries, the practice of deradicalization is based on the same idea, debate or dialogue between the extremist and a more moderate voice. In Singapore and Yemen, these dialogues are held between extremists and more moderate clergyman. In Saudi Arabia, a team of clergymen, psychologists, consultants, and external communication advisors, is involved. Indonesia uses prominent former radicals to provide the more moderate viewpoint. I am bringing up the Fareed Zakaria program because it illustrates well what could happen if this approach is adopted without proper insight in the underlying motivation of deradicalization. While the conversation between Zakaria and Chaudhary started fairly respectfully, it soon escalated into a verbal contest where neither side even bothered to listen to the other side's opinion. It was clear that the external incentives for changing Chaudhary's beliefs (i.e. Zakaria's arguments) were not attuned to Chaudhary's mindset (i.e. Chaudhary was not open to belief change).

Many of the programs to deradicalize Jihadists take place in prisons. And in such environment, it is not really clear what motivates Jihadists to adopt more moderate viewpoints. Often, the most tangible reward for participating in deradicalization programs is release from prison. But one could doubt this is an appropriate incentive for cognitive change. It will require some considerable further research and development to assess the effectiveness of deradicalization programs. Part of an effective assessment will inevitably be the assessment of changes in motivation to adopt alternative viewpoints. But at present,

there is limited insight in what motivates people to adopt these alternative viewpoints in the first place.

Proposition 3. *Insights from psychology are still insufficiently used to increase effectiveness of deradicalization.*

The idea that there is limited insight in what motivates people to adopt alternative viewpoints and that, at present, we have limited possibilities for assessment of effective deradicalization, inevitably leads to questions of how to improve insights and how to improve assessment. In this regard, it is quite remarkable how little interaction there seems to exist between the literature on deradicalization and the literature on social psychology, in particular on attitudes and social cognition. The social psychology of attitudes and social cognition has generated many useful insights in the conditions under which persuasion is effective and belief change occurs, as well as how to assess such change.

A research project that I participated in together with colleagues from the University of Arizona and the University of British Columbia provides a case in point[xi]. It dealt with erroneous political beliefs prior to the American presidential elections in 2008, and in particular concerned the belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim. In several experiments, it was found that Republican leaning voters were more likely to belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim than Democratic voters. Moreover, half of the Caucasian participants were asked to indicate their race, while race was not made salient for the other half, and this salience of race lead participants to more strongly associate Barack Obama with Islam and to a strengthened belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim.

The findings of these experiments help to inform deradicalization practices as they provide insight in the psychological circumstances under which people are willing to espouse extremist (or simply untrue beliefs, such as that Obama is a Muslim) beliefs. First, when there is already an ideological divide, there seems to be greater readiness to adopt a false belief regarding someone from the other side. Secondly, when differences are highlighted, this readiness seems to strengthen. The lessons for deradicalization practice, then, is that it may very well be essential to first create a sense of "we-ness", or a sense of common

reference, a "dialogue frame" so-to-speak, in order to enable exchange of ideas and influence of ideas. Thus, the findings from the experiments underscore the rationale of the two-dimensional structure of deradicalization. Effective belief change seems to require both the creation of the condition under which there will be an openness to consider new points of view (endogenous cognitive change), as well as the salience of particular ideas to help to influence the belief change in a particular direction (exogenous cognitive change).

Conclusion

While I recently attended a meeting on security, I heard the phrase "the mind will be the battleground of the 21st century". If so, then we should really take an interest in deradicalization. We should take an interest not only because it provides a new way of countering terrorism, but also because it may foreshadow developments in strategic thinking. If the mind will indeed be the battleground of the 21st century, deradicalization may develop into a very significant weapon. But considering it a weapon, i.e. an instrument for tactical and strategic change, also comes with many questions that are yet to be answered: What should the target be of deradicalization? Where can you find such a target in the mind? Thus, what does the "architecture" of extremist beliefs look like? And what methods are most effective to bring about belief change? Under what conditions can deradicalization best take place? What "incentives" encourage deradicalization? And, are there individual differences? If the mind will be the battleground of the 21st century, answers to these questions will indeed be of considerable strategic

Endnotes

[i] Ripley, A. (2007). Future revolutions: Reverse radicalism. *Time*.
http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1720049_1720050_1722062,00.html. Accessed 8 September 2010.

[ii] Dechesne, M. (2011). Deradicalization: Not soft, but strategic. *Crime, Law, and Social Change, 55,* 287–292.

[iii] McCauley, C. (2006). Jujitsu politics: terrorism and response to terrorism. In P.R. Kimmel and C.E. Stout (eds.), *Collateral Damage: The Psychological Consequences of America's War on Terrorism* (pp. 45-65). Westport, CN: Praeger.

[iv] E.g Kruglanski, A. (2002). *Inside the Terrorist Mind*. Paper presented to the National Academy of Science, at its annual meeting, April 29, 2002, Washington, D.C.

[v] Dechesne, M., & De Roon, C. (2013). Coming Home: Deradicalization for returning Jihadis. *Journal Exist Deutschland*. http://journals.sfu.ca/jed/index.php/jex/article/view/42.

[vi] Gumber, A. (2007). Woman's diary of a jungle guerrilla's life. The Independent.
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/womans-diary-of-a-jungle-guerrillas-life-401531.html. Accessed 8 September 2010.

[vii] Horgan, J. (2009). Disengaging from Terrorism. In *The Faces of Terrorism: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations*, ed. D.C. Canter, 258–276.

[viii] See also note ii

[ix] Horgan, J. (2009). Disengaging from Terrorism. In *The Faces of Terrorism: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations*, ed. D.C. Canter, 258–276. London: Wiley-Blackwell; Horgan, J. (2009). *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*. London and New York: Routledge; Stern, J. (2010). Mind over Martyr. *Foreign Affairs, 89*, 95-108. Neuman (2010 see note ii); Bjorgo and Horgan (see 2009).

[x] Zakaria, F . (2010). GPS. As can be seen on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQyJLc-oQNc.

[xi] Kosloff, S., Greenberg, J. Schmader, T., Dechesne, M.,& Weise, D. (2010). Smearing the opposition: Implicit and explicit stigmatization of the 2008 U.S. Presidential candidates and the current U.S. President. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 139*, 383-398.