

Helpdesk Research Report

Counter- and de-radicalisation with returning foreign fighters

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Question

Identify examples of counter or de-radicalisation work with returning foreign fighters in conflict-affected and nearby states. Include examples where returnees are involved in counter or de-radicalisation programmes. Present the lessons learned emerging from these projects and evaluations of them.

1. Overview
2. Impacts and evaluations
3. Lessons learned and recommendations
4. Case studies
5. References

1. Overview

The documentation on counter- and de-radicalisation programmes for returning foreign fighters¹ in conflict-affected and nearby states is limited. There is evidence of programmes that aim to de-radicalise, disengage and rehabilitate² detained extremists in prisons, which in some cases target foreign fighters. A number of these programmes in the Middle East and Southeast Asia are well documented, and information is included in this report on those for which evidence of foreign fighter involvement exists are. The literature contained no instances of female foreign fighters included in programmes.

¹ The Global Counterterrorism Forum define foreign fighters as ‘individuals who leave their home countries to participate in conflicts abroad, acquiring skills and an ideological commitment that could be used in acts of terrorism in their home countries or elsewhere’ (GCTF, 2014, p. 1). Briggs and Frennet (2014) state that although this process has a long and varied history in the West, in recent decades it has become an almost entirely Muslim phenomenon.

² Rabasa et al. (2010, p. 181) state that disengagement entails a change in behaviour—refraining from violence and withdrawing from a radical organisation. De-radicalisation is the process of changing an individual’s belief system.

These programmes are based on approaches to criminal rehabilitation, and involve a mix of vocational training and counselling, with a religious component designed to challenge extremist narratives and ideologies (Burke, 2013; Neumann, 2010). Rigorous external and comparative evaluations of these programmes do not exist (Schmid, 2013).

There is very limited coverage of approaches where returning foreign fighters have not been criminalised as part of de-radicalisation efforts. The Saudi Arabian approach aims to treat extremists as beneficiaries who have been misled rather than criminals. A recent Tunisian amnesty and reconciliation proposal for returnees from the Syrian conflict is mentioned in the news media, but it is unclear whether this has been implemented and how successful it has been.

Evidence on the involvement of former foreign fighters in counter- or de-radicalisation activities is also limited. Prominent examples include Saudi Arabia, where former extremists convey counter-narratives as part of a comprehensive counter- and de-radicalisation strategy, and Indonesia, where former militants act as interlocutors in a prison-based de-radicalisation programme.

There are a few studies that have surveyed prison-based de-radicalisation programmes and offer lessons learned and recommendations, based on secondary data and interviews with key officials and experts. These do not offer specific conclusions on the involvement of former foreign fighters, either as participants or interlocutors. Key points include:

- **Context and cultural awareness:** Programmes are more effective when they are consistent with, and derive from, a country's culture, rules and regulations, and take account of what is acceptable in their societies (El-Said, 2012). Whether programmes can make a substantial contribution to ending terrorism or countering violent extremism often depends on the prevailing situation and the intensity of conflict in the country (Neumann, 2010).
- **National consensus and leadership:** A lack of popular and political support can hamper de-radicalisation efforts, whilst a committed national leadership can provide programmes with impetus.
- **Comprehensive and long-term approaches:** The most effective programmes have been comprehensive efforts that challenge extremist beliefs, provide emotional support and offer post-release vocational or monetary support as incentives. This encourages militants to give up violence, to change their worldview, and assists their re-integration into society (Rabasa et al., 2010).
- **Credible interlocutors:** Theologians and former militants have legitimacy. They can discourage those with extremist views from joining terrorist groups and offer a credible counter-narrative (Neumann, 2010). However, the use of former militants and foreign fighters as interlocutors has also drawn criticism. Some argue that detainees are not truly de-radicalised because the interlocutors do not promote a truly moderate ideology (Rabasa et al., 2010; Sim, 2013).
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Evidence suggests that recidivism rates are not reliable metrics for measuring impact. Critical areas for exploration include clarifying selection screening procedures for admittance, monitoring participants in a meaningful and effective way post-release, and developing meaningful and valid empirical indicators for the reduced risk of re-engagement (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

2. Impacts and evaluations

Schmid (2013, p. 50) states that little is known about de-radicalisation, and that even less research exists on counter-radicalisation and what works. Part of the problem is that results are hard to measure³.

On the subject of prison-based de-radicalisation programmes, Schmid (2013) contends that rigorous, external and comparative evaluations do not exist. Horgan and Braddock (2010, p. 268) state that 'it has been practically impossible to ascertain what is implied by or expected from programs that claim to be able to de-radicalize terrorists. No such program has formally identified valid and reliable indicators of successful de-radicalization or even disengagement...Consequently, any attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of any such program is beset with a myriad of challenges that are as much conceptual as they are practical'.

Experts question the effectiveness of de-radicalisation programmes. There are a number of reasons why this is the case:

- **Dissimulation:** Extremists may learn to 'talk the talk' in order to be released from prison. This is evidenced by the fact that a number of the graduates of the Saudi programme have reportedly fled to Yemen and re-joined AQAP (Schmid, 2013, p. 43).
- **Secrecy:** Schmid (2013) states that there is often no evidence of valid internal or external evaluation, or any demonstration of clear criteria for establishing the effective measurement of success.
- **The difficulty of measuring success:** Recidivism rates are often used by governments to justify and demonstrate the success of programmes. However, they may not be the best metric with which to measure impact. Many programmes are recent and longer time periods may be needed to gauge whether an individual has been fully rehabilitated. Programme eligibility also differs, and many programmes exclude hard-core militants in favour of those who were only marginally involved. This skews the results and makes programmes which are open to all offenders look less successful than those which concentrate on the easier cases (Neumann, 2010, p. 49).
- **Context specificity:** Knowledge about de-radicalisation programmes is fragmented and uneven. This makes the comparative evaluation of initiatives difficult (Schmid, 2013, p. 49). Neumann (2010, p. 47) examines programmes in Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Yemen. He argues that they are too different and too dependent on local context to measure their success and compare their results.
- **Ideological content:** Experts question whether theologians and former extremists involved in programmes as interlocutors promote truly moderate ideologies. In Indonesia, local clerics believe that 'local jihad' is unjustifiable, whereas global jihad against Western powers is legitimate given certain conditions (Burke, 2013). In Yemen, it is not clear whether graduates of the RDC programme who then participate in foreign conflicts are actually considered as failures (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

³ An accompanying rapid research report on 'Strategic communications and foreign fighters' (Bakrania, 2014) discusses the evidence on and impact of counter-radicalisation programmes.

3. Lessons learned and recommendations

This section summarises the lessons learned and recommendations made about prison-based de-radicalisation programmes. Other than stating that former extremists can offer credible counter-narratives and act as effective interlocutors (Neumann, 2010), the literature does not offer specific recommendations on the involvement of returned foreign fighters in such schemes.

Context and cultural awareness

El-Said (2012) states that programmes must be consistent with, and derive from, each country's culture, rules and regulations, and take account of what is acceptable in their societies.

Neumann (2010, p. 57) reinforces this position, stating that programmes always need to be adapted to:

- The prisoner population, and their individual and collective needs and motivations.
- The nature and ideology of the groups to which prisoners used to belong.
- The society from which they originate, its structure and customs.
- The dynamics of the wider conflict and other external conditions, which may affect the programme's outcome.

Whether programmes can make a substantial contribution to ending terrorism or countering violent extremism often depends on the context. For example, Neumann (2010, p. 56) argues that whilst both the Indonesian and Yemeni programmes are considered to be unstructured and flawed, the former is considered a success and the latter a failure. When the Indonesian programme began, local conflicts were winding down, whilst in Yemen, local conflicts were starting to intensify.

National consensus and leadership

El-Said (2012) states that a lack of popular and political support has hampered de-radicalisation efforts in some contexts, Yemen being one example. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia, a committed national leadership has provided policies with impetus, creating and maintaining a national consensus.

Comprehensive approaches

Rabasa et al. (2010, pp. 184 – 185) state that many de-radicalisation initiatives offer three components: challenging radical Islamist principles, offering emotional support, and providing post-release practical support. They argue that it is difficult to disentangle each component's effects and to determine which part produces moderation. Therefore, the most effective programmes have been comprehensive efforts that work on all three levels.

El-Said (2012, pp. 46 – 47) states that counter- and de-radicalisation programmes work most effectively where the government attempts to improve overall socio-economic conditions. It is highly unlikely that religious dialogue and counseling alone will terminate violent extremism (ibid).

Consistent and long-term support

Rabasa et al. (2010, p. 186) argues that dialogue alone does not break militants' commitment to a radical movement or equip them with the skills they need to become productive members of their community. Programmes can offer practical and ideological support after prisoners have been released, and provide

incentives to ensure that militants remain disengaged. After-care entails locating graduates in a supportive environment and facilitating their reintegration into society (ibid).

Programmes that include the militant's family appear to increase the probability of the individual remaining disengaged. Programmes may incorporate families by offering counseling or by making them the guarantors of a graduate's behavior (Rabasa et al., 2010, p. 186).

Credible interlocutors

De-radicalisation efforts are dependent on the ability of the state to find credible interlocutors, including theologians and former militants (Rabasa et al., 2010). Neumann (2010, p. 58) states that individuals who have abandoned terrorist groups can discourage extremists from joining terrorist groups and offer a credible counter-balance to radical narratives. Furthermore, de-radicalised or dis-engaged individuals are more likely to cooperate with authorities in a meaningful way. They may assist investigations, serve as witnesses or work with prison authorities to encourage other prisoners to abandon violent associations.

However, the use of former militants and foreign fighters as interlocutors has also drawn criticism. In the Indonesian case, some argue that detainees are not truly de-radicalised because the interlocutors do not promote a truly moderate ideology – opposing the killing of civilians whilst continuing to espouse radical beliefs (Rabasa et al., 2010, p. 116).

Monitoring and evaluation

Horgan and Braddock (2010) state that critical areas for exploration on de-radicalisation programmes include the clarity around selection screening procedures for admittance, monitoring participants in a meaningful and effective way post-release, and developing meaningful and valid empirical indicators for the reduced risk of re-engagement.

4. Case studies

Country approaches to counter- and de-radicalisation range from those that are more comprehensive, such as the well-funded and structured Saudi Arabian programme, to the more ad-hoc, such as the Yemeni and Indonesian approaches. They also differ in their use of former militants and foreign fighters, with the Indonesian approach being based on the involvement of former militants as interlocutors.

Saudi Arabia

Prevention, Rehabilitation, and After-Care (PRAC) is a high profile, comprehensive and well-funded programme that was established in 2004. It has several elements, including counter-radicalisation activities as well as rehabilitation and disengagement programmes. A core principle of the programme is that detainees are treated as beneficiaries who have been misled and in need of advice, rather than criminals (Fink & El-Said, 2011).

Participants in the programme include detainees who have travelled to Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Chechnya, and returnees from Guantanamo Bay (Burke, 2013; Rabasa et al., 2010). Recently, further rehabilitation centres have been opened to rehabilitate returnees from the Syrian conflict (Zelin & Prohov, 2014).

Counter-narratives by former militants

The Saudi government has used television to convey messages by disillusioned former fighters to deter the recruitment of Saudi citizens by groups in Syria. These aim to deglamorise the Syrian jihad and condemn offensive practices that Syrian rebel groups have engaged in (Zelin & Prohov, 2014).

Rehabilitation and after-care

A counselling programme offers religious discussion and debate, and extensive social support. Support is also given to family members to prevent further radicalisation in the family. Where the main salary earner is detained, families are provided with an alternative income, and support with schooling and healthcare. Prisoners are held at facilities closer to their families to enable greater family interaction, to incorporate families into the rehabilitation process, and to assist with detainees' reintegration into society. Support is also offered after release – those who complete the programme satisfactorily and renounce their extremist views are assisted with locating jobs and provided with stipends and housing (Rabasa et al., 2010).

Impacts

The programme is considered as a success if solely based on measurements of recidivism. As of 2008, no graduates had been involved in terrorist violence within Saudi Arabia (Fink & El-Said, 2011).

Rabasa et al. (2010, p. 76) argue that the apparent success should be treated with caution. Only moderate extremists have been released, not those who have participated in violent extremist acts. Furthermore, it is difficult to obtain accurate data, and the data that is available is insufficient for robust evaluations.

There have also been some high-profile failures. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed under the leadership of two PRAC graduates in 2009, who had publicly dismissed the programme as a trick (Fink & El-Said, 2011).

Yemen

The Committee for Religious Dialogue

Yemen's Committee for Religious Dialogue (RDC) was a government initiative established in September 2002. The programme was based on religious dialogue between clerics and detainees, aiming to correct the detainees' extremist beliefs. The programme faced challenges; it was often at the centre of political disputes and struggles and was discontinued in 2005 (ICPVTR, 2011).

Dialogues were conducted in small groups of between five and seven people. The detainees involved in the programme were a heterogeneous group, including Afghan veterans, as well as members of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The discussions centred on interpretations of the Quran, and on the legitimacy of violent jihad (Taarnby, 2005, p. 134).

Impact

Yemeni officials claim that 364 suspected militants had been released as part of the programme, and consider the post-release progress to be 'encouraging' (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 276).

Experts question the effectiveness of the programme and whether released detainees have changed their militant views. Taarnby (2005, p. 135) argues that the high number of released detainees requires further enquiry. He describes how human rights activists criticise the notion that theological dialogue can change militant views. Yemeni experts also question whether militants denounce violence because they have changed their mind or merely because they want freedom (Horgan & Braddock, 2011, p. 276).

The Yemeni scheme has also been criticised for being ad-hoc and poorly thought out. It was partly aimed at deflecting US pressure. There is inadequate after-care, and many participants re-joined terrorist groups in order to support their families (Burke, 2013; Rabasa et al., 2010).

There have been unconfirmed reports of former detainees being caught fighting coalition forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and as part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Taarnby, 2005; Horgan & Braddock, 2011). This has fueled skepticism as to whether those who ran the RDC viewed participation in those conflicts as justifiable, and whether those taking part in conflicts as foreign fighters are actually considered as failures by the programme (Horgan & Braddock, 2011).

Indonesia

Police-run de-radicalisation approaches

Indonesia has adopted a police run de-radicalisation programme focusing on prisoners and their families. The programme provides prisoners with financial assistance and vocational training during the detention period to facilitate their integration into society (Istiqomah, 2011).

Former militants have been identified to act as interlocutors and provide intelligence about Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other extremist groups. Prominent figures include Nasir Abas, a former senior JI leader who had trained in Afghanistan, and Ali Imron, another Afghan veteran. Both of these have been given access to other detainees to engage in informal debates around the rights and wrongs of violent jihad (ICG, 2007, p. 12).

Counter-radicalisation involving former militants

Nasir Abas has been a key element in public efforts to prevent the radicalisation of Indonesian youth and to facilitate the disengagement of existing JI members. As well as working with the Indonesian police counter-terrorism unit, Ali Imron has written a book and publicly described what he considered to be his mistakes as a jihadi (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 273).

Impact

Horgan and Braddock (2010, p. 274 - 274) state that the Indonesian programme is unique in its use of ex-terrorists as central to de-radicalisation process. They argue that this allows officials a level of insight they would probably not have had otherwise. The credibility and respect commanded by Ali Imron and Nasir Abas encourages participants to fully disengage from terrorism.

However, despite officials asserting the success of the programme, the decision by participants to renounce extremist views may largely be the result of monetary incentives rather than de-radicalised attitudes. This implies that many of those released from prison may do so with their extremist views intact (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 274).

A lack of transparency surrounding official statistics calls the claimed success rates into question (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 274). At least 20 recidivists were involved in a terrorist network uncovered in Aceh in north-western Indonesia in March 2010 (Burke, 2013).

Pakistan

A number of de-radicalisation initiatives have been implemented in Pakistan, which were largely influenced by the Saudi model (Rana, 2011). These initiatives are relatively recent and there is little indication of their impact thus far.

Burke (2013) describes a police-led programme in Punjab. It targets former militants who fought in Afghanistan, with the aim of countering financial offers that extremist groups might make. The focus is largely on un-employed, semi-employed or unskilled candidates, who are offered three months of vocational training in trades such as plumbing, carpentry or electrics, followed by an interest-free loan to set up small businesses. The programme also included a religious dialogue element, where Deobandi scholars countered misconceptions about Islam.

Tunisia

Media reports indicate that Tunisia has proposed an amnesty and reconciliation mechanism for those who have travelled to Syria, but who have not killed anyone and who surrender their arms. It does not apply to known members of al-Qaeda and Ansar-al-Sharia. The Tunisian interior ministry describes it as a 'forgiveness and repentance law', which assists with integrating foreign fighters back into society (Arfaoul, 2014; Zelin & Prohov, 2014).

Critics counter that the proposal is flawed, arguing that it can't be implemented because Tunisian authorities do not have a database of individuals that have joined Syrian terrorist groups (Arfaoul, 2014).

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Key websites

- International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research: <http://www.pvtr.org/>
- Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: <http://www.start.umd.edu/>
- Center for Strategic Communication: <http://csc.asu.edu/>
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue – Counterextremism.org: <https://www.counterextremism.org/>
- RAND – National Security Research Division: <http://www.rand.org/nsrd.html>

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