Nonviolent Counterterrorism: Combating Violent Extremism through Deradicalization

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Abstract

An ever increasing threat posed by violent extremists typifies the world today. This research paper aims to explore various methods that could be employed in order to deradicalize violent extremists, as well as determine which of these methods most effectively deradicalizes violent extremists. Specifically, the research paper synchronizes traits found in literature regarding deradicalization, and describes how ideology, significance quest, and social networks relate to radicalization and deradicalization. Deradicalization efforts must involve a focused effort to moderate extremist views in an environment prepared specifically to encourage openness to a change of mind in an extremist, as well as address the motivation, ideology, and social networks connected to a violent extremist (Dechesne, 2011; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). These results help advance the knowledge by presenting a deradicalization strategy usable in most situations.

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Increasingly since the September 11th attacks on the world trade center, violent extremists pose a significant threat to safety of civilians across the globe. Since this time, a struggle to better understand violent extremism and an endeavor to discover different means of countering it has occurred. The administration of United States president Barack Obama has employed a strategy of addressing causes of violent extremism, such as extremist ideology, instead of directing its energy towards military efforts such as which characterized past administrations ("National Security Strategy" 2015, p. [iii-iv]). In accordance with this new strategy of the United States, studies such as those conducted by Dugas and Kruglanski (2014), and Kruglanski et al. (2014) illustrate that deradicalization serves to address these causes of violent extremism. However, there exist numerous different means of deradicalization. This provokes an important question. Which of these means, or combination of means, most effectively deradicalizes violent extremists? Further understanding in this ambiguous area would serve to improve the overall practice of deradicalization as well as improve the policy of governments around the globe regarding deradicalization. This research paper aims to explore various methods that could be employed in order to deradicalize violent extremists, as well as determine which of these methods most effectively deradicalizes violent extremists. The definition utilized by the research for the term "violent extremism" stems from the Executive Office of the President (2011) which describes it as "individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals" (p. 1). Four distinct sections comprise this research paper in order to most effectively achieve its purpose. The first section sets forth a synchronization of traits found in different research regarding deradicalization. The second section focuses on ideology and how it relates to radicalization and deradicalization. The third section and forth sections do likewise,

though instead of focusing on ideology, they instead cover significance quest and social networks respectively.

## A Synchronization of the Literature

The literature has much to say regarding the subject of deradicalization, therefore a synchronism of existing theories of deradicalization serves to promote a finer understanding of how to best deradicalize violent extremists. Deradicalization serves to temper extremist thoughts (Dechesne, 2011, p. 289). Successful deradicalization programs must exhibit two different factors. Firstly, they must take place in an environment that encourages openness (Dechesne, 2011, p. 289). Secondly, in addition to the environment, an effort to moderate extremist views must be undertaken (Dechesne, 2011, p. 289). Radicalization itself directly relates to deradicalization (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Kruglanski et al (2014) describe the two terms as "mirror images of each other" in that specific deradicalization efforts reverse specific elements that radicalize (p. 84). These elements of radicalization highly relate and connect to each other and include a goal or motivation, an ideology that sanctions violence, and social circumstances in which a group holds a common motivation and ideology (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Within these broad categories, more specific motivations exist for committing extremist acts "such as honor, vengeance, religion, loyalty to the leader, perks in the afterlife, even feminism" (Kruglanski, et al., 2014, p. 73). Unfortunately, the findings of the literature sometimes stand in contrast to how detained terrorists are handled. In some situations, "isolation and close monitoring are used most frequently to manage these terrorists" (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014, p. 431). These methods do not suffice to deradicalize violent extremists (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014, p. 431). In contrast, it actually serves to promote radicalization in a

prison setting (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014, p. 431). The knowledge provided by the literature must be utilized in order to successfully deradicalize violent extremists.

## The Role of Ideology

Ideology plays a major role in radicalization and deradicalization. Ideology does not necessarily stand alone as a factor in radicalization (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Instead, it can most often be observed in a group setting (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Individuals experience ideologies as a result of these groups in which the members all share the same reality (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). Not all ideologies possess radical traits, however. Three distinctive traits differentiate radical ideologies from non-radical ideologies. Firstly, there must exist some sort of perceived harm done to one's group (Kruglanski, et al., 2014, p. 77). Secondly, an individual or group must be identified as causing this harm (Kruglanski, et al., 2014, p. 77). Thirdly, the ideology morally justifies terrorism, sees it as an effective means of addressing the wrong received, and praises the one who commits the act of terrorism (Kruglanski, et al., 2014, p. 77). Researcher Mark Dechesne (2011) recognizes that "[i]t is important to differentiate between physical and psychological forms of disengagement" (p. 288). Simply because an individual's behavior no longer shows signs of radical thought does not means that the individual has forsaken such thought (Dechesne, 2011). Because of this, efforts to address radical ideology should not be considered successful based solely upon an individual's engagement in radical behavior (Dechesne, 2011). A change in ideology requires violent extremists to become receptive to changing what they believe in (Dechesne, 2011). Change also requires exposing the extremists to non-violent viewpoints (Dechesne, 2011). Part of building this receptiveness to change can be achieved by emphasizing the similarities between the extremist and the one attempting to deradicalize him or her (Dechesne, 2011). Although the presence of an extremist ideology plays

a very important role in radicalization and deradicalization, one must note that motivating factors to commit extremist acts are not always rooted in ideology (Stern, 2010).

## The Role of Significance Quest

Oftentimes these motivating factors can take place in the form of things as simple as a strong commitment to a leader, revenge, or honor (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Researchers Dugas and Kruglanski (2014) argue that these motivations all possess an underlying theme in the "quest for significance" which they define as "a fundamental desire to achieve a sense of respect, or more colloquially, to 'matter' and 'be someone'" (p.424). The objectives to which violent extremists so fiercely dedicate themselves are defined by this significance quest (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Situations that can set an individual on a quest for significance include a diminution of significance, an expected diminution of significance, and an opportunity to increase significance (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). In an extremist's quest for significance, violence can be utilized to achieve significance, therefore deradicalization efforts should attempt to portray violence as either morally unacceptable, or if not, at least as futile method of attaining significance (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). Furthermore, seeing as a single goal generally holds the sole focus of a violent extremist, a successful deradicalization includes efforts to decrease the devotion of an extremist to the goal in question and illustrate how different goals can produce significance (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). The quest for significance serves as a theme that connects the specific motivations for extremists (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Because of this, each attempt to deradicalize an individual should be tailored specifically to address not only the quest for significance, but also the individual's specific motivation for committing extremist acts. Though an individual's quest for significance clearly plays a vital role in radicalization and

deradicalization, it operates in conjunction with other aspects that leads to radicalization (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). As such, it should not be the sole focus of deradicalization efforts.

## The Role of Social Groups

Another such aspect that plays a vital role in both radicalization and deradicalization is social groups (Stern, 2010). It provides such a fundamental component to these processes because oftentimes both ideology and significance quest operate within a group context. A group in which a violent extremist typically operates possesses a common ideology that the group pursues to gain significance (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Simply existing within a group setting oftentimes provides individuals with a sense of greater significance (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014, p. 428). Receiving respect from group members when pursuing their goal using violent means heightens this sense of significance (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014, p. 77). Seeing as social groups play such an important role in radicalization, it might appear that a simple separation from the social group in question would be sufficient to encourage deradicalization. However, as recognized by researcher Mark Dechesne (2011), this merely leads to a "physical withdrawal from violent engagement without psychological deradicalization" (p. 288). Successful deradicalization instead seeks to illustrate that the undertakings of the social group cannot be morally justifiable or do not effectively accomplish the goals that they attempt to achieve (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Perhaps deradicalization could also focus on providing an extremist with a moderate ideology possessing social group through which they can also achieve significance. Due to its binding effect on ideology and significance quest, it can be just as integral to deradicalization as it is to radicalization.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The threat posed by violent extremists has increased dramatically in recent years. This

has necessitated an increased understanding of such extremists in an effort to discover various

means of countering them. This has led to the advent of considering deradicalization as a means

to address the root causes of violent extremism. This paper strives to present what methods

comprise an ideal form of deradicalization. Such a form of deradicalization must involve a

focused effort to moderate extremist views in an environment prepared specifically to encourage

openness to a change of mind in an extremist (Dechesne, 2011). The motivation, violence

sanctioning ideology, and social networks possessing a common motivation, and ideology

provide the three integral components of radicalization that a successful deradicalization attempt

must address (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski, et al., 2014). As the research conducted

for this paper progressed, it became increasingly apparent that there existed a large gap in the

literature in regards to deradicalization attempts addressing specific motivations. The literature

primarily groups these motivations similar to those described by researcher Kruglanski et al.

(2014) "such as honor, vengeance, religion, loyalty to the leader, perks in the afterlife, [and]

feminism" under the quest for significance (p.73). While this may benefit a greater

understanding of a common theme that binds these motivations together, it creates a lack of

information on specific motivations. This information might prove useful to deradicalizing

extremists motivated by these aspects. Similarly, this lack of research seemed to also permeate

the aspects of social groups and ideology. The literature generally did not specifically describe

the social groups and ideologies in question. Therefore, it must be understood that this paper

provides a general overview of how an ideal deradicalization program might appear rather than a

deradicalization program that would function effectively for a specific type of violent extremist.

Ideally, each deradicalization program should be tailored to address the specific needs of the

extremist in question. Regardless, an encompassing idea of a successful deradicalization program such as that proposed in this paper helps advance the knowledge of the different aspects of deradicalization usable in most situations.

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