

# Perspectives on Measuring De-Radicalisation Programs in Europe

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## **AVERA – COMMENTARY**

*By Brahim Laytous – Head of AVERA Department*

### **POST-DERADICALISATION ERA?**

The Brussels International Center for Research Human Rights (BIC HR) recently organized a study day in the Belgian Federal Parliament on the commemoration of the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 22 March terrorist attacks in Brussels. The event was centered around the book publication of “Disarmed – an Unequal Battle” - which evaluates the current security situation in Belgium, with various experts discussing the security policy in Belgium over the past years.

The study day covered several analyses and recommendations, including the need to systematically evaluate and measure the effectiveness of de-radicalization policies and programs with the aim to continuously improve them.

Such improvements are certainly necessary and urgent given the still critical issues and failings of current Islamic extremists de-radicalization attempts in prisons. For example, it was stated that all the 403 Syria-fighters already released from Belgian prisons between 2016 and 2021 still had contact with other known extremists and terrorists. Of these 49 have been expelled from the country, while another 103 extremists remain in prison<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on numbers requested by N-VA member of Parliament Theo Franken, Belga,21/03/2021.

## AFTER RELEASE FROM JAIL

While in a state governed by the rule-of-law, prisoners are released after servicing their sentence, it remains a question whether Islamic extremists really have a path to integration in society and whether the current follow-up provided is adequate and sufficient. This is particular the case in Belgian jails due to its overpopulation (estimated at 27% in 2015, with 13,000 inmates<sup>2</sup> for a capacity of just over 10,000 cells) putting extra pressure on early release decisions and exacerbating the potential to become hotbeds of radicalization. Moreover, Belgium has one of the highest costs per detainee in Europe, estimated at 150 Euros/day compared to 102 Euros in France, 112 Euros in Germany and 115 Euros in the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, there is a particular need to strengthen follow-up, risk assessment, de-radicalization and integration programs.

De-radicalization efforts traditional goes through a three-step process:

**It starts** with Disengagement, which focuses on changing holding on to certain ideas and voluntary leaving the group to which one belonged and that was planting or reinforcing such skewed ideas.

**The second** step is Deradicalization and focuses on changing and disproving the extremist ideology through several rounds of discussion on the one hand, and the rejection of violence on the other.

**The third** step is then a Reintegration of the ex-convict as a valuable and adding value member of society.

## APPROACHES TO DE-RADICALISATION

Currently there are seven distinguished types of de-radicalization programs that are being applied worldwide (see scheme below)<sup>4</sup>. These can categorize as active versus passive, governmental versus non-governmental and ideological versus non-ideological.

The ideological and theological programs who addresses the ideology more common in the Islamic world (Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) and in Southeast Asian.

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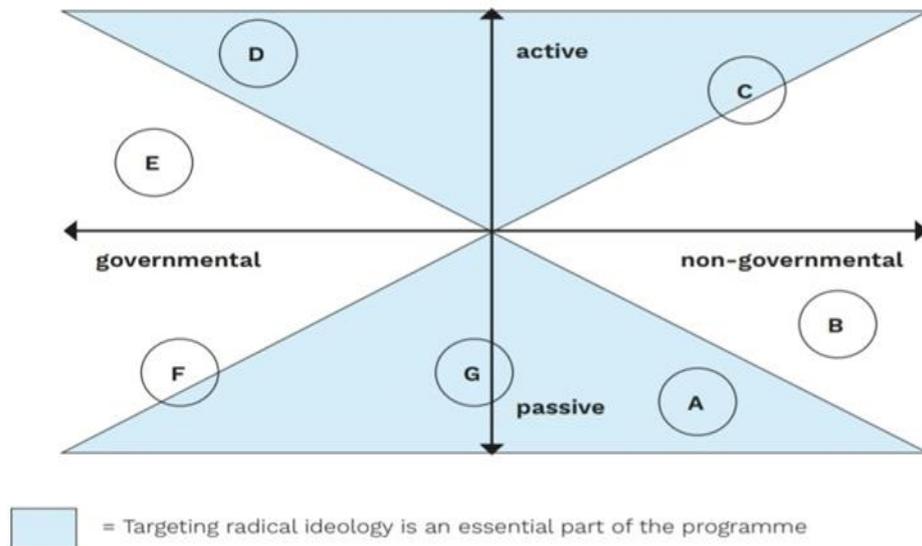
2 Dermine Paul, Dermine Thomas, Hanseeuw Laurent, Heymans Johan , Proesmans Sam , Hanard Audrey (ed.) "Onze gevangenen, een gevaar voor elk van ons", published by the 'Vrijdaggroep' and a project of KBS, 2018

3 Idib.

4 Idib.

*Schematic representation of different CVE programs* <sup>5</sup>

**Typology of de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes**



- Non-governmental and works passively without addressing the ideology (types A and B) such as Exit-Sweden.
- Non-governmental and active programs (type C).
- Governmental and active programs (types D and E) usually prison-based-programs.
- Governmental – passive (type F), category of hotlines or helplines to detect and intervene)
- Public –private partnerships (type G). They attempt to combine the strengths of governmental and non-governmental actors.<sup>6</sup>

In the Islamic world, theological discussion groups have been ongoing for years, with some of the first ones starting in Egypt in the late 1990s with the publication (and many revisions after) of a series of books under the title "Correcting Concepts or Thinking", or in Arabic "Tashihul Mafahim"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Deradicalisering' Wetenschappelijke inzichten voor een Vlaams beleid, Colaert Lore (ed.) Brussel, Vredesinstituut , 2017

<sup>6</sup> Deradicalisering' Wetenschappelijke inzichten voor een Vlaams beleid, Colaert Lore (ed.) Brussel, Vredesinstituut , 2017

<sup>7</sup> Laytous Brahim, Deradiant , Nazorg van ex-gevangenen a.d.h.v. ideologische gesprekken, Zoetermeer, SchrijversHuis,2018.

Our approach as BIC-AVERA is ideological/theological, through a reliable measuring instrument DERAD that can measure radicalization on both a micro-level (for individuals) and meso-level (for mosques and schools). The assessment is causally linked to programs that can counter the wrongful and extremist conceptualization of Islamic ideas and teachings.

The academic debate about which factors ultimately lead to violent extremism is still ongoing, in how far ideology is the prime or decisive factor or whether it is rather just a side-effect of a complex set of psycho-social and other factors.

Our view, based on our experience and research, is that theological and ideological factors do play an important role during radicalization and should therefore be an integral part of a multidisciplinary approach to assessment. This is particular the case with youngsters who are specific targeted by radical groups because of their limited and un nuanced understanding and knowledge of Islam and are as a result more influential to a process of gradual radical indoctrination. As such detecting critical gaps in knowledge and/or the availability of ideas and concepts that can be exploited for advancing radical and extremism ideas provides both an early warning system and powerful tool to conduct effective – both preventive and curative - educational and de-radicalization programs.

Two strong indications of the importance of theological-ideological factors include the findings of a 2016 Europol report showing that only 40 percent of youngster arrested for IS—related crimes proofed to have a sound knowledge of Islam<sup>8</sup>; and an extensive interview program of IS-fighters in Syrian prison camps that indicated the importance of Islam as part of their personal identity and motivation. In other words, Islam is an important driver of behavior in general, but it is the wrong interpretation of this faith due to a lack of knowledge of it that is making them susceptible to become a force of violence instead of a force of peace. As such not less but more and correct understanding of Islam is required, an Islam that as we have over-viewed before is perfect compatible with secular democratic societies.

As part of such our efforts to develop assessment and evaluation instruments and accompanied targeted de-radicalization and integration programs, BIC-AVERA has not only submitted a couple of research proposals but is also actively working on developing online and offline evaluation and measurements instruments. These can be applied for early detection of both radicalization signals but also the potential susceptibility of radical discourse and behavior in the future. Currently the instrument focuses mainly on theological and ideological warning signs but will in the future be further enhanced with important psychological, sociological and economical dimensions.

The tool further offers the advantage of combining an early warning assessment with specific learning modules/subjects to provide a counter narrative and prevention of

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<sup>8</sup> Europol, Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015, Den Haag (18 January 2016), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/changes-in-modus-operandi-of-islamic-state-terrorist-attacks>, geraadpleegd op 15/04 maart 2021.

radicalization. As such the instrument could also be applied in schools or specific communities.

The current instrument that consists two modules in order to measure extremism based on:

1. Orthodox jurisprudence and Islamic law based on the classical schools of law
2. Rigid and/or intolerant ideologies which distort or misinterpret scriptural texts (Quran and Sunnah)

## TO MEASURE IS TO KNOW

Psychological and behavioral research into physical aggression and violence has shown only modest correlations between certain personality types or disorders, of people with narcissistic, borderline and or anti-social/psychotic personality types as well a drug and alcohol abuse in the case of males and depression and anxiety in the case of females. Moreover, these correlations are not causalities, but only show an increased probability of being triggered in aggressive or violent behavior.

Based on such research several measurements have been developed that are used in the clinical world, mainly to predict violence in psychiatric patients, with the most used being the Historical Clinical and Risk Assessment (HCR-20). Another clinical instrument to assess the probability of violent behavior with criminals is the Structural Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY).

However, these and other risk assessment protocols currently available have questionable relevance of violent extremism and terrorist that are ideological driven and therefore find their origin in quite different and a wide variety of contextual backgrounds, motivations and triggers.

Structured Professional Judgments (SPJ) in generally show some more promise in risk assessment but because they are only semi-structured and rely heavily on the personal experience and knowledge of an expert assessor, they are costly, time consuming and not suitable for mass deployment.

Among the risk assessment tool being developed and used with various governments are:

- Radix and KIM-3.0 (Netherlands)
- VERA-2 - Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (Canada)
- IVPG - identifying Vulnerable People Guidance
- ERG 22 - Extremists Risk Guidance

The issue in assessing the quality of these instruments is that on the one hand some of them are propriety (such as the ERG and KiM) and thus not open for outside evaluation; and on the other hand, the the relative low number of test subjects making it difficult to gather enough statistical data to conduct reliability, consistency and

validity studies and making it all but impossible to use big data or actuarial approaches to assessment.

In contrast to the above, the instrument we are working on as BIC-AVERA based on measuring expressions and conceptions of religion and map out intolerant ideological components in their gradation and pathway to a full-blown radical and political ideology. The assessment will cover around 10 categories including progression of religious and/or ideological worldview, self-views, right and wrong coping behavior, progression on extremism and political Islam concepts, etc. and will result in a measurement of religious radicalism (light, medium, high, alarming).

The educational program linked to the assessment will focus on the 1) the correct (re)interpretation of ideology in the right historical, theological, philosophical and spiritual context and meaning; 2) a positive development of self-identity and self-esteem; 3) the correct coping mechanism to handle personal (internal) and interpersonal (external) tensions and conflicts based on the correct Islamic example; and 4) addressing the root causes of hatred and justification of violence.

The implementing this new risk assessments instrument and measurement will enable to detect tendencies towards violence or susceptibility to extremist propaganda. The advantages include the ability to obtain a picture of breeding grounds in society; which individual or groups are more susceptible for Islamic propaganda and radicalization; monitor whether radicalization tendencies are increasing or decreasing over time; and to evaluate the effect of de-radicalization programs whether conducted in society in general or specific in prisons<sup>9</sup>.

The measurement is based on our experience and research into the methods and processes used by jihadist recruiters and common (ranging from very subtle to very vocal) Islamic mis conceptualizations of Islamic theology, morality and behavior (and in a later phase also Islamic psychology, philosophy and spirituality). Several examples have been provided in previous articles and include:

1. Prohibiting something that is allowed – drawing up own rules (e.g., monasticism)
2. Allowing something that is forbidden (e.g., the killing of innocent people)
3. Exaggeration and excesses in performing worship (e.g., fasting and Quran recitation)
4. Turning away from worldly affairs altogether
5. Making Quranic interpretations based on an ego- or ethnic centric point of view (e.g., the role of women)
6. Consciously disregarding important aspects of Islamic theology and behavior (e.g., close mindedness)

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9 Broekhuizen Jolijn, Van Kapel Maaïke, Hermens Freek, Zicht op radicalisering over de ontwikkeling van een onderzoeksinstrument ; kennisplatform integratie & samenleving Utrecht,2017

## CONCLUSION

Even though empirical data on the effectiveness of de-radicalisation programs remains limited and sparse, it is critical to develop better models and instruments that can detect, understand and remedy deviant thinking and behavior both preventive and curative.

Our experience and research indicate that progression in Islamic radicalization and violent extremism can be measured ranging from exceedingly early risk factors, susceptibility and symptoms to violent psychopathic behavior based on a full-established extremism ideology and worldview.

We are working to further develop, test and implement these ideas in the future.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Author

Brahim Laytouss | Head of AVERA Department



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 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 [www.bic-rhr.com](http://www.bic-rhr.com)  [info@bic-rhr.com](mailto:info@bic-rhr.com)

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466