Fully Operational? The Ongoing Challenges of Terrorist Risk Reduction Programs

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JOHN HORGAN, JUL 29 2013

Terrorist deradicalization. What an intriguing idea for a quick fix if ever there was one. Yet never in the history of counter-terrorism has any short-term solution ultimately proven to be more than a naïve pipedream. That is not to suggest that what is commonly called "deradicalization programs" would see themselves as representing a quick fix. But the allure surrounding these creative approaches to counterterrorism has been so powerful that a seeming failure to deliver on the implicit (and vague) promise of "revers[ing] radicalism" has apparently led to a loss of popularity. That may not be a bad thing, but a critical question lingers around whether or not these programs are effective.

The programs are as numerous as they are diverse in their goals. They range from some well-known and highly publicized initiatives in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Iraq, Indonesia and Yemen to fledgling efforts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya and Somalia.

If anything, they are increasing in number.

The development of some programs began as much as ten years ago. While never initially intended for public awareness, some (e.g. the Saudi program) were buoyed on by their own claims of phenomenal success that they embraced publicity a few short years into their experimental construction. In fact, so convinced of their own effectiveness, several programs welcomed foreign media, law enforcement, academics and anyone else interested in seeing how 'radicalization' was apparently being undone.

Though the data tended to shy away from making an appearance, a powerful display of national pride usually did with former prisoners, offered up as role models of successful deradicalization, often on hand to meet with foreign guests.

Those claims of extraordinary effectiveness provided strong motivation for the academic and policy-oriented research that followed, much of that research posing important questions rarely considered by the programs themselves.

Among some of the most high profile efforts were those by the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College, London. They presented a wide-ranging report in 2010 into such initiatives across fifteen countries.

ICSR proposed a list of "key underlying drivers and principles of individual disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes". These, the report asserts: "may help policymakers understand the phenomenon and identify elements of best practice".

In a subsequent ICSR study, a detailed report in 2012 by Hamed El-Said, the author provided carefully nuanced recommendations for understanding the factors that promote success across many different countries.

Yet, less than a year after the second report, ICSR Director Peter Neumann decried de-radicalization programs as

resembling "a bid of a fad".

So what changed?

It's Complicated...

Let's first assert a few basic facts. Collectively these initiatives are still called "deradicalization programs" yet this continues to be an unerringly misleading description. At its most basic the idea of deradicalization exists within a context of rehabilitation. Attempting to promote deradicalization is predicated on the presumed need for some effort to undo the social and psychological change that accompanies (or is a product of) the initial move into terrorism in the first place. This need is frequently addressed via religious counseling, psychotherapy or through efforts at promoting restorative justice either during an individual's detention (e.g. meeting with those he has victimized) or post-release. More often that not, deradicalization is thought to be more or less the emergent quality of some combination of these.

Yet when deradicalization is even a formal element of such initiatives, it is only one of multiple, overlapping objectives and programmatic elements. These range from helping terrorist 'dropouts' disentangle from deeply woven social bonds forged with their former comrades to repatriating them back into the communities from whence they came. In 2010, supported by the University of Maryland's START consortium, Kurt Braddock and I proposed the development of a multi-attribute framework with which deradicalization programs could be evaluated for effectiveness. But one of several recommendations was to abandon the collective label "deradicalization programs". Instead we suggested "risk reduction" programs. After all, the one common denominator in all of these initiatives is that they try to reduce the risk of re-engagement in terrorism. Only some of these programs try to achieve this through "de-radicalization" (significantly, no matter how broadly defined).

In terms of reducing the risk of re-engagement in terrorism, some of the most effective programs (e.g. Sabaoon in North West Pakistan) emphasize the need to equip participants with vocational training. In part this is to enable them to play a constructive role in their communities, but also it is a way for younger participants to shield themselves from a terrorist group that otherwise can provide them with food, shelter and some sense of purpose. The change in attitudes, values and prior level of commitment to the terrorist group in part a *product* of continued adherence to this new role and identity.

The Sabaoon program is also a good example to highlight the fact that answers to the effectiveness question cannot be separated from the need to ensure for ongoing, post-release supervision. When participants in rehabilitation programs are released from detention, it is because they are classified as "low risk" for re-engagement, and they have made sufficient progress through their participation in the program. But the true test of that change, and of the risk classification of the program's staff, can only be fully informed with data from post-release monitoring. This can take years, not days, weeks, or months, to effectively ascertain.

Additionally, the heterogeneity of these programs cannot be overstated. They are not just diverse and context-specific but the more successful and ambitious initiatives themselves adapt to changing environments, priorities and objectives. In fact, the real challenge in answering the question of their effectiveness is actually a testament to whether the programs are as adaptable as the radicalization and recruitment strategies the terrorist groups themselves use to pull in new members.

Ok, It's Complicated...But Do They W*ork*?

The short answer is: it depends. The question of what we call them and as a result what we think these programs do (and why this is important) are not just pedantic academic questions – more on this to follow. But on the surface at least, some of the programs would appear to be more effective than others. Some are certainly far more transparent than others about how they operationalize and measure success. And many are indeed highly effective, but not for the reasons we might assume.

To figure out what is at the heart of a seemingly stagnant debate of whether they are effective or not, it seems to be

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the case that interest in the programs has *thus far* spawned far more commentary than actual research. The result has been, to borrow Inzlicht and Schmeichel's (2012, p.453) description of a different challenge, that our understanding has "sacrificed deep explorations of process for broad explorations of application." Yet those broader explorations are frequently devoid of data, context and realistic sense of limitations.

It's possible that the 'faddishness' of these programs (likely a view held not just by Neumann but others too) may reflect little more than the short-term interests of some who study terrorism. It may also, however, seriously reflect lack of meaningful access to those programs, their methodologies, data and other features. In recent years, considerable potential has become evident from discussions about terrorism in the context of forensic psychology. Perhaps the most obvious complaint is the fact that efforts at evaluation tend to be expressed via prescriptive commentary (limited interviews with program representatives is typically the most one can expect) than data-driven empirical efforts closely tied to programmatic objectives, outcomes and their measures.

Little surprise therefore that much of that commentary, isn't always precise. In an article published several weeks ago in the *Guardian* newspaper, journalist Jason Burke shared his concerns, noting: "On the whole, no attempt is made to deradicalise the most committed extremists, particularly those…who were involved in serious plots, successful or otherwise". In more than one program currently operational in Pakistan, my colleagues and I have found that former terrorists were deeply engaged in the gamut of activities, from the mundane to the horrific. The boys and adolescents participating in risk reduction programs: trained in firearms and munitions, were bystanders in torture, active participants in torture, forced to witness the beheading of soldiers, subsequently participating in beheadings, and have prepared for suicide bombing missions (with more than one changing his mind at the very last second). Some of these boys were deeply committed and ideologically equipped, while the majority was not. Yet they were all deeply committed and engaged in plots, and it rarely gets more serious than that.

It's possible that Burke was referring to efforts to de-radicalize *leadership* figures, but it is unrealistic to think that any program, no matter how effective could ever be "the" answer to all participants even within a specific context but the point remains the same – discourse surrounding the presumed effectiveness of these programs is one that is being driven not by empirical research into the programs themselves but commentary around what is assumed of these programs and what (we think) they do.

Yet we cannot escape a major bottleneck. Not only is meaningful access limited, but when it occurs it more often than not is delivered when considered 'safe' to do so –when a program appears to be producing successful results. The more pressing challenge here is to bring about active partnerships much earlier in the process, ideally in the design phase such that far more effective evaluation processes and procedures can be built into the core design of such programs. How that engagement might occur is unclear, but an important principle is in identifying a shared sense of priorities with mutually beneficial principles of engagement and its value made clear.

Looking Ahead

In a recent article with my colleague Mary Beth Altier, we explain why terrorism risk reduction programs can expect a rough ride ahead. And still, an apparent loss of popularity may not actually be a bad thing. If anything it might actually spur practitioners to take discussions about evaluation and effectiveness (and engagement with those who know about evaluation) far more seriously than themselves retreating behind the 'it's complicated' defense.

In time, far earlier engagement between practitioners and academics would ensure that evaluation is not merely an afterthought taking center stage in defending against negative publicity. If these programs are to have a future, that kind of engagement will likely prove necessary, not just desirable.

That is not to say there have not been examples of outstanding research on these issues from a psychological perspective, but there is much more to do. Undoubtedly, and to echo Gregory Johnsen (2012, p.136) some programs are borne out of sheer necessity – when simply nothing else seems to work, engaging with overcrowded prisoners might appear an "elegant solution". In such cases, there is far less concern about having a transparent set of psychological principles underpinning whatever temporary solution is called on to achieve a quick fix.

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There is considerably more to learn from areas that on the surface appear too different to be of use. In a 2011 book chapter, Max Taylor and I argued that Sex Offender Treatment programs (SOTPs) have much in common with programs to manage terrorist behavior. Offenders from both areas are often highly motivated, socially challenging to deal with, and both cause extensive victimization of innocents. SOTPs use Cognitive Behavior Therapies (CBT) and focus on relapse prevention. This essentially focuses on the maintenance of behavioral changes by anticipating and coping with the problem of relapse.

We still know very little about what factors contribute to terrorist recidivism and what we could otherwise term spontaneous re-engagement, where in the absence of any ideological commitment, someone appears to "just do it". It is possible that the process owes less to ideological ties and more to social bonds with former comrades.

Given this and other pressing needs, considering the relevance of CBT strategies has to be another area for future exploration, because, critically, CBT frameworks offer opportunities to develop empirically verifiable behavior change strategies as well as enabling systematic outcome assessment.

Outside a potentially distracting though self-inflicted media glare, the challenges faced by practitioners who staff these programs border on overwhelming on a daily basis. A growing reality is the increased presence of children in these programs. In some cases this has led to the formation of child-centric risk reduction units. Children have increasingly been the target of terrorist recruiters for years now yet the situation both in Pakistan and especially Afghanistan is becoming more dire with each passing month.

In journalist Amanda Ripley's original 2008 *Time* magazine article on de-radicalization, she said of attempting to decipher progress on terrorist psychology that the better the study, the more muddled the findings tended to be. The inverse is undoubtedly true. To be fair then, it's little wonder that the idea of terrorist de-radicalization remains so controversial when in the absence of transparency and in some cases even just getting basic facts right, we oversimplify and embrace quick judgments about whether these programs are effective or not.

Whatever we choose to call these programs, they will struggle to retain their once bright future if devoid of evaluation. This has to be carefully forged through partnerships from the outset, not at the end. And those partnerships will be unlikely to be meaningful without systematic engagement from academia.

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