

Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review

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Based on an in-depth literature review, ICCT Visiting Research Fellow Dr. Alex P. Schmid explores the terms 'radicalisation', 'de-radicalisation' and 'counter-radicalisation' and the discourses surrounding them. Much of the literature on radicalisation focuses on Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism. This is also reflected in this Research Paper which explores the relationship between radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. Historically, 'radicalism' – contrary to 'extremism' – does not necessarily have negative connotations, nor is it a synonym for terrorism. Schmid argues that both extremism and radicalism can only be properly assessed in relation to what is mainstream political thought in a given period. The paper further explores what we know well and what we know less well about radicalisation. It proposes to explore radicalisation not only on the micro-level of 'vulnerable individuals' but also on the meso-level of the 'radical milieu' and the macro-level of 'radicalising public opinion and political parties'. The author re-conceptualises radicalisation as a process that can occur on both sides of conflict dyads and challenges several widespread assumptions. The final section examines various counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation programmes. It concludes with a series of policy recommendations.

Executive Summary

The terms 'radicalisation', 'de-radicalisation' and 'counter-radicalisation' are used widely, but the search for what exactly 'radicalisation' is, what causes it and how to 'de-radicalise' those who are considered radicals, violent extremists or terrorists has so far been a frustrating experience. The popularity of the concept of 'radicalisation' stands in no direct relationship to its actual explanatory power regarding the root causes of terrorism. In Europe, it was brought into the academic discussion after the bomb attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) by policymakers who coined the term 'violent radicalisation'. It has become a political shibboleth despite its lack of precision.

Historical Roots and Definitions

Based on an in-depth literature review, this paper seeks to explore key terms and the discourses surrounding them in greater detail. Much of the literature on radicalisation focuses on Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism and this is also reflected in this Research Paper. Looking at the historical roots of radicalism, the subject is a relative one and has often been a force of progress. As such, its derivative, 'radicalisation' is not necessarily a synonym for terrorism. The paper proposes a distinction between radicalism and extremism. While both stand at some distance from mainstream political thinking, the first tends to be open-minded, while the second manifests a closed mind and a distinct willingness to use violence against civilians. A re-conceptualisation of radicalisation is proposed after a discussion of numerous academic and governmental definitions of radicalisation.

The Two Sides of Radicalisation

The paper also seeks to differentiate between terrorism and other forms of political violence – some worse and some less unacceptable than terrorism itself. It acknowledges that there are certain forms of violent resistance to political oppression that, while illegal under certain national laws, are accepted under international humanitarian law. For analytical purposes, political violence should be situated in the broader spectrum of political action – persuasive politics, pressure politics and violent politics – by those holding state power as well as non-state militant actors. With this in mind it should also be recognised that radicalisation is not necessarily a one-sided phenomenon, it is equally important to examine the role of state actors and their potential for radicalisation. The use of torture techniques and extra-judicial renditions in recent years, has been a drastic departure from democratic rule of law procedures and international human rights standards. These are indicative of the fact that in a polarised political situation not only non-state actors but also state actors can radicalise.

Drivers of Radicalisation

An exploration of the literature also confirms the pitfalls of profiling those individuals 'likely' to become terrorists. The current propensity to focus in the search for causes of radicalisation on 'vulnerable' young people has produced inconclusive results. The number of push and pull factors that can lead to radicalisation on this micro-level is very large – the same is true for the factors which can impact on de-radicalisation and disengagement. However, in the literature most findings are derived from small samples and few case studies, making comparison and generalisations problematic, and findings provisional. The paper pleads to look for roots of radicalisation beyond this micro-level and include a focus on the meso-level – the radical milieu – and the macro-level – the radicalisation of public opinion and party politics – to gain a better understanding of the dynamic processes driving escalation. The paper synthesises what we think we know about radicalisation and identifies those areas where our knowledge is 'thin'.

Conclusions

When it comes to de-radicalisation/dis-engagement and counter-radicalisation the paper concludes that it is difficult to identify what works and what does not work in general, or what is even counter-productive. Local context matters very much and academics and policy makers alike are increasingly recognising this fact. At this stage we still lack rigorous evaluations that allow us to determine the relative merits of various policies with a high degree of certainty. The lack of clarity and consensus with regard to many key concepts (terrorism, radicalisation, extremism, etc.) – ill-defined and yet taken for granted – still present an obstacle that needs to be overcome. The paper concludes with a set of findings and recommendations and identifies two major gaps in

current counter-radicalisation efforts – one referring to the role of the media and the Internet and the other to the role of counter-narratives to those of jihadist terrorists. It identifies credibility and legitimacy as core ingredients of any political narrative hoping to catch the imagination of people at home and abroad. They are key resources in counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism. Governments need not be perfect before they can effectively engage in successful de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation efforts. However, they have, in the eyes of domestic and foreign publics, to be markedly better than extremist parties and terrorist organisations.

About the Author

Dr. Alex P. Schmid is a Visiting Research Fellow at ICCT – The Hague and Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), an international network of scholars who seek to enhance human security through collaborative research. He was co-editor of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* and is currently editor-in-chief of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, the online journal of TRI. Dr. Schmid held a chair in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews where he was, until 2009, also Director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV). From 1999 to 2005 he was Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the rank of a Senior Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer. From 1994 to 1999, Dr. Schmid was an elected member of the Executive Board of ISPAC (International Scientific and Professional Advisory Council) of the United Nations' Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme. Until 1999 he held the position of Extraordinary Professor for the Empirical Study of Conflict and Conflict Resolution (Synthesis Chair) at the Department of Sociology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, and the position of Research Coordinator of PIOOM (Interdisciplinary Research Projects on Root Causes of Human Rights Violations, Centre for the Study of Social Conflict) at Leiden University. Currently, Alex Schmid serves on a number of boards, including Europol's TE-SAT, the Genocide Prevention Advisory Network (GPAN), the Asia-Pacific Foundation and the Global Terrorism Database of START, a Centre of Excellence of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security at the University of Maryland. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) in Oklahoma.

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