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De-radicalization and Integration
The United Kingdom's Channel Programme

Rashad Ali



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About the Author

Rashad Ali is a fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London and a counterterrorism practitioner. He has worked on de-radicalization initiatives in the UK for over five years in prison, probation, police, and community settings. Classically trained in Islamic theology and jurisprudence, he is a former member of the extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Abstract

The British government has long employed intervention tactics to prevent radicalization and to de-radicalize committed militants. This paper analyses various aspects of this strategy, from the referral process to the dynamics of the intervention itself, from the characteristics of the “intervention providers” to potential controversies.

Introduction

Early intervention as a strategy for de-radicalization has been used in various spheres, among them health, child wellbeing, education, drugs, and crime. The overarching guiding principle is that when there are high risks, vulnerabilities, or pre-dispositions toward a particular negative condition, consequence, or behavior, intervening in the early stages of such development can prevent the condition from arising. In respect to radicalization, the theory states that while there is not a single or linear radicalization trajectory, it is both possible and necessary to intervene before the individual is radicalized and considering undertaking a violent extremist act.¹

In the United Kingdom (UK), this intervention has developed over a period of time and has been the cause of much debate.² In practice, those targeted for intervention and de-radicalization are not merely individuals or clusters undertaking acts of violence for political or ideological ends, but also those promoting, supporting economically, and glorifying such acts. Thus, the radicalization and de-radicalization processes alike—particularly for those who have been convicted under UK legislation—is the remit of both prevention and de-radicalization officials.³

While it has traditionally been argued that radicalization is a long process, recent incidents have demonstrated that such as a process can arguably be as short as a matter of weeks or months.⁴ This increased pace of radicalization has brought the discussion of intervention, prevention, and disruption to the forefront of the domestic policy debate in the UK. The ideal outcome of this debate is the creation of a coherent de-radicalization and intervention policy—complete with additional measures to prevent radicalized individuals, some as young as 15, from undertaking activities such as flying abroad to join the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—to implement when deemed appropriate.⁵

When considering how interventions work, there are several primary questions that must be addressed: How are the appropriate people identified, and how are risk of and vulnerability to radicalization assessed and managed? How is the intervention and de-radicalization process undertaken? How is this process monitored and evaluated? The following paper will answer these questions in respect to the UK context, and identify a number the UK's current intervention policy's problem areas.

¹ Rashad Ali, "Roots of Violent Radicalisation," Counter Extremism Consultancy, Training, Research and Interventions, February 2012.

² For a good summary of these discussions see "The Definition of Terrorism: A Report by Lord Carlile of Berriew Q.C. Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation," Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, March 2007, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228856/7052.pdf.

³ Her Majesty's (HM) Government, "Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism: Statutory guidance for Channel panel members and parts of local panels," Home Office, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425189/Channel_Duty_Guidance_April_2015.pdf.

⁴ The author has encountered such statements from counterterrorism police in the UK in his field of work.

⁵ iTV News, "Bristol Teen Thought to be 'at Risk of Radicalisation' has Passport Seized," June 5, 2015.

The Referral Process

The process of identifying at-risk individuals is the most contentious aspect of intervention policy, as identifying vulnerability to radicalization is a difficult process. At present, there are a wide variety of opinions regarding the causes of radicalization and terrorism, whether local or national grievances, ideology, personal circumstances, pathology, or a combination of factors. The UK approach is based on studies that have looked at sample groups of convicted terrorists and developed an elaborate assessment framework for ascertaining “vulnerability factors” that are either causally related to or at least correlate with all of the individuals’ psychologies.

The UK Channel Programme—a service that delivers interventions to individuals deemed vulnerable to radicalization—uses this framework to determine if an individual is suitable for early intervention. Specifically, these factors are used by Channel agents to both assess an individual’s risk level and to determine the appropriate risk-reduction strategy to prevent offense or re-offense. Subsequently, this assessment framework is used to determine an individual’s vulnerability to radicalization and violence.⁶ For the duration of the intervention, Channel agents monitor and evaluate the case, all the while continuing to learn about these factors as they relate to the individual case.

These factors, which can be found in the statutory guidance, can be broadly understood as falling within three chief categories: engagement, intent to cause harm, and capacity to cause harm.

Engagement

Engagement factors are sometimes referred to as “psychological hooks.” These factors include needs, susceptibilities, motivations, and contextual influences, and together map an individual’s pathway to terrorism. By no means an exhaustive list, these factors can include the following: feelings of grievance and injustice; feeling under threat; a need for identity, meaning, and belonging; a desire for status; a desire for excitement and adventure; a need to dominate and control others; susceptibility to indoctrination; a desire for political or moral change; opportunistic involvement; familial or peer involvement in extremism; being at a transitional time of life; being influenced or controlled by a group; and diagnosis of relevant mental health issues.

Intent to cause harm

Not all those who become engaged by a group, cause, or ideology go on to develop the desire or intention to cause harm. For this reason, this dimension of risk assessment is considered separately from the engagement factors. Intent factors underscore the mindset associated with a readiness to use violence, and address the actions an individual is willing to undertake and to what end. These factors can include: over-identification with a group or ideology; ‘us vs. them’ thinking; dehumanisation of the perceived enemy; attitudes that justify offending; harmful means to an end; and harmful objectives.

⁶ See statutory guidance explaining the framework, HM Government, “Channel: Vulnerability assessment framework,” Home Office, October 2012, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118187/vul-assessment.pdf.

Capacity to cause harm

Similarly, not all those who wish to cause harm on behalf of a group, cause, or ideology are capable of doing so, as plots to cause damage take a high level of personal capability, resources, and networking to be successful. An individual's capacity to cause harm is therefore a key consideration when assessing the risk a given individual realistically poses to the public. These capacity factors can include: individual knowledge, skills, and competencies; access to networks, funding, or equipment; and criminal capability.⁷

Police handle the risk assessment and are charged with determining whether an individual is actively involved in a terrorist plot, requiring investigation, or undergoing prosecution for terrorism-related charges prior to enrolment in the program. If an individual is found to be actively engaged in a terrorist plot, he or she is suitable for the Channel strand of Prevent, alongside convicted radicals. On the other hand, those undergoing prosecution for terrorism-related offenses are not eligible for Prevent, and thus fall under the Pursue arm of the UK counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST.⁸ This separation between Prevent and Pursue is vital in that it creates a "Chinese wall" between the investigative component of counterterrorism, requiring intelligence gathering and prosecution, and the intervention and de-radicalization component.

Referrals are made by frontline staff, individuals within the relevant communities, and the wider public. Included among the frontline staff are police, probation officers, prison staff, social workers, social services, and schools, the latter of which is the source of the highest volume of referrals. Precisely because Prevent is not an early intervention model like statutory safeguarding, the primary concern is for the individual referred rather than the larger criminal sphere.⁹ Consequently, any general staff that interacts with the public is considered to be among the frontline staff. Referrals also come from those convicted under the Terrorism Act and those convicted of Islamist-inspired violence under other statutes.¹⁰

It is for this reason that the claims of alarmists and political opponents that Prevent is a mass surveillance tactic and intelligence gathering exercise—similar to other intervention measures and safeguarding measures—are arguably unsubstantiated. Precisely because the referral system was created to be an open and transparent process, it is not uncommon to receive referrals from mosques and community activists. Additionally, the structure of the system demands a number of awareness raising campaigns with various community-based groups

⁷ CONTEST has four strands: Protect (which seeks to “strengthen our protection against terrorist attacks”), Pursue (which seeks to “stop terrorist attacks), Prepare (which seeks to “mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack”) and Prevent (which seeks to “reduce the number of people becoming or supporting terrorism”). See statutory guidance explaining the framework, HM Government, “Channel: Vulnerability assessment framework.” Home Office, October 2012,

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118187/vul-assessment.pdf.

⁸ HM Government, “CONTEST: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism,” July 2011, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97994/contest-summary.pdf.

⁹ HM Government, “Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism: Statutory guidance for Channel panel members and parts of local panels,” Home Office, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425189/Channel_Duty_Guidance_April_2015.pdf.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of the various criteria under which someone could be considered to have been convicted of an Islamist-inspired act, as well as the relevant statistical analysis, see Robin Simcox, Hannah Stuart, Houriya Ahmed, and Douglas Murray, “Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections,” *The Henry Jackson Society: Program for Democratic Geopolitics*, 2011, 2nd Ed., <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/Islamist+Terrorism+2011+Preview.pdf>.

and trainings for frontline staff to ensure that all relevant members of the community are capable of recognizing the signs of vulnerability and the early stages of radicalization.¹¹

Structure of the Intervention

After each referral is made, the case is assessed by the local area Channel Panel, a multi-agency panel of relevant mainstream service providers that can administer the holistic support—namely in the realms of education, social services, mental health, and religion—required for successful intervention. After making an initial assessment of the vulnerability factors, the panel decides whether the involvement of a specialist intervention provider—a mentor, approved by Prevent leaders, charged with reducing the referred individual’s vulnerability to radicalization or risk of violent offense—is appropriate.

Prior to the start of the intervention individuals must give informed consent, acknowledging that they are aware of the nature of the program and agree to take part in the process voluntarily. Each individual referred through the Prevent program meets with a relevant community engagement officer, probations officer, schoolteacher, and any additional personnel deemed appropriate over the course of the program.

These meetings between the referred individual and relevant service providers take place in diverse locations depending upon what is deemed most effective. Unsurprisingly, initial encounters result in an array of reactions. While some individuals are initially hostile, others experience feelings of concern and fear, especially since authorities are involved. These concerns are usually allayed.

While each case varies in length, the majority last anywhere from six to eight months to up to two years until closure. In some instances, cases are mistakenly referred, and thus are closed shortly after the initial assessment.

The entirety of the intervention is closely monitored, allowing for consistent updates to the initial vulnerability assessment and an assessment of the intervention provider. Each case is revisited three, and again six, months after closure. This component is critical in that it allows for an accurate evaluation of both the individual and the intervention itself. Monitoring the intervention both during and after of the program allows staff to re-examine initial decisions and the impact of changes in circumstance and situation, as well as whether further engagement is required. Subjects often form strong relationships with their intervention provider and seek to maintain informal contact for years afterward.

Winning Confidence

The initial engagement seeks to demonstrate clearly to the referred individual that those providing the intervention are primarily concerned with the referred individual’s best interests, and do not have an ulterior agenda. Further, intervention providers use the initial

¹¹ For an explanation of the WRAP training, see HM Government, “Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism: Statutory guidance for Channel panel members and parts of local panels,” Home Office, 2015, p. 10, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425189/Channel_Duty_Guidance_April_2015.pdf.

sessions to diagnose any and all potential issues or obstacles. The goals at this stage are, broadly defined, to make an assessment of the individual and win his or her confidence.

In the nascent stages of the intervention, the most common causes for concern are the individual's competency and ability to deal with the issues being addressed. Among these concerns are theological issues, especially in respect to Islamist-inspired (potential) offenders. Those actively engaged with Islamist content, individuals, or organizations often embrace an "us vs. them" mentality, manifesting itself in a belief that the world is divided into the world of Islam and the world at war with Islam. Additionally, these individuals sometimes express support for individual terrorist acts or groups.

These beliefs are inextricably linked to political perspectives and a combination of religious jurisprudence and scripture that comes together in a hybrid form of modern Islamist ideology. In many cases, this hybrid ideology legitimizes the creation of an Islamic state with an Islamic constitution and laws, as it is held to be the only acceptable form of governance. This belief neglects the fact that the idealized Islamic state is anachronistically modern and different than the aspirations of returning to the pure, early, and fathers of Islam's first three generations, or *Salaf*, claimed by Islamist groups.¹²

The Role of Religion

The nature of intervention work raises a number of tough ethical questions. Are intervention practitioners trying to shape political attitudes and dissent? More fundamentally, is the program a means for the state to interfere with an individual's religious proclivities?

In fact, much of the political reaction to the intervention program has centred on whether the process interferes in religious matters or stifles free speech and debate. The first concern deserves consideration, as some counterterrorism measures have historically aimed at reinforcing certain conservative strands of religion. In addition to ethical concerns, these measures have been heavily critiqued in respect to effectiveness,¹³ tactical necessity, and the value of such programs being promoted and funded by state.¹⁴

In respect to the latter, in principle interventions neither aim to nor take place in the context of shaping the normative persuasions of an individual's religious and political beliefs. Rather, the program uses a neo-Socratic methodology, where the underlying assumptions connected to religious beliefs—claims of religious and jurisprudential or theological authenticity—and political assumptions are challenged in an effort to force the individual rethink their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.

¹² For a critique of the theological and ideological ideas of such a group, see Participate Don't Isolate, "Political Participation," April 28, 2015. See also Rashad Ali and Hannah Stuart, "A Guide to Refuting Jihadism: Critiquing Radical Islamist Claims to Theological Authenticity," *The Henry Jackson Society*, 2014, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Refuting-Jihadism.pdf>.

¹³ Will McCants and Rashad Ali, "Experts Weigh In (Part 7): Is Quietist Salafism the Antidote to ISIS?," *The Brookings Institution*, April 7, 2015.

¹⁴ Haras Rafiq and Rashad Ali, "Haras Rafiq and Rashad Ali: When will the authorities learn that extremists can't be used to tackle other extremists?," *Conservative Home*, December 21, 2010.

The Intervention Process in Action

The intervention process writ large can be illustrated by a case that came in the wake of the January 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. Following the attack, a number of UK-based individuals justified the act on religious grounds, claiming that the perpetrators acted in a manner acceptable under the standards of *shari'ah* (Islamic jurisprudence).¹⁵ This defense has been used as justification for similarly motivated attacks in the past.

In conversations with UK-based individuals sympathetic to this line of reasoning, intervention practitioners were forced to address a number of issues. Some individuals claimed that medieval Islamic authorities, namely Ibn Taymiyyah, supported such attacks and that those condemning the attacks were "sell outs." Intervention providers sought to highlight that medieval Islamic scholars, Ibn Taymiyyah included, did not argue that it is permissible for non-state actors to engage in acts of terrorism.

Intervention providers countered this belief by underscoring that Muslim scholars from a number of sectarian traditions hold a range of views on this issue. While some contend that acts of blasphemy are to be addressed as a legal issue by the state, others, among them some of the earliest Muslim scholars, explicitly forbade capital punishment and banned Muslims from compelling non-Muslims to embrace Islam.

Another justification was the suggestion that those who worked at *Charlie Hebdo* had provoked the attack by espousing anti-Islamic views. Intervention providers argued that this contention is fundamentally flawed, as *Charlie Hebdo* has taken anti-Israel, anti-French military, and pro-immigration stances, and actively criticized the Right and Far-Right political scene. Additionally, only two of the magazine's issues explicitly satirized Islam; discussion of religion was more often than not limited to Christianity. Intervention practitioners also highlighted the hypocrisy inherent in advocating the right of Muslims to engage in proselytization activities and freely criticize the government, while simultaneously defending the concept that those challenging Muslim ideals deserve to be silenced and violently attacked.

Finally, some went so far as to suggest that international treaties calling for the universal respect of human rights and freedom of belief are fundamentally contrary to Islamic teachings. Some intervention providers argued that in reality Muslim writings from the pre-modern era, calling upon Prophetic precedent, contain discussions of a conservative and orthodox nature in which scholars hold that treaties and agreements defending universal human rights are both acceptable and binding. Intervention practitioners asked those referred to the Prevent program to attempt to reconcile these contradictory ideas.

While all of the issues raised above are complex, the creation of an environment where the referred individual and program staff can engage in an open exchange eventually undermines the credibility, authenticity, orthodoxy, and allegedly Islamic nature of Islamist terrorism, and causes the moral and political components of its narrative to crack.¹⁶ Ultimately, these changes can lead to a realization that previously embraced attitudes, perspectives, and emotional states need to change. Such self-realization allows for measurable change, namely

¹⁵ Case studies have to be left with as little detail as possible for reasons of sensitivity and legality.

¹⁶ For a full discussion on this subject see Rashad Ali, "Blasphemy, Charlie Hebdo, and the Freedom of Belief and Expression: The Paris Attacks and the Reactions," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, February 2015.

reduction in the vulnerability factors. Over a period of time, addressing these complex issues reshapes vulnerabilities and risks that were identified in the initial exchanges.

While this is the ideal outcome of the intervention, cases may have multiple complicated layers, including mental health issues requiring expert engagement and assistance from psychiatrists and psychologists. Other individuals may have more nuanced political and moral motivations. For example, those whose family members were killed in attacks led by Western military forces have real grievances that must be addressed. In these cases, emotional and political motivations arguably precede the embrace of extreme ideological or religious narratives. Thus, intervention practitioners must untangle the emotional and/or political from the ideological. In this instance de-escalation, not de-radicalization, is the primary objective. Intervention practitioners seek to highlight that terrorism does not serve justice, but rather repeats the same evils by creating more violence. Coupled with support from mainstream services and counselling, these individuals can build resilience.

Conclusion

There are questions, critiques, and challenges inherent in defining radicalization and de-radicalization, measuring and monitoring both, and determining the appropriate targets of intervention and de-radicalization programs. At present, there are a number of issues that must be addressed in order to develop and improve such a vital sector: How do we assess the challenges facing individuals and intervention provision in the UK? How do we maintain high ethical and moral standards, and avoid the creation of a negative atmosphere? How do we constantly evaluate the work being undertaken, and the strengths and weaknesses of existing structures, processes, and procedures? How do we provide ongoing evidence-based information and good practices to develop an established professional culture in this field? How do we measure the overall necessity and effectiveness of reducing extremist violence in the UK?