
Looking Outward: Enhancing Australia's Deradicalisation and Disengagement Programs

Kristen Bell

In the coming years, Australia will face a cohort of violent extremists different to anything it has experienced in the past. In the face of the potential threat posed by violent extremists and returning foreign fighters, expansion of Australia's existing deradicalisation and disengagement programs will be necessary. Deradicalisation and disengagement programs in other countries show that with sufficient resources, funding and long-term commitment to success, positive results in deradicalising and disengaging violent extremists and radicalised individuals can be achieved. To this end, Australia would be wise to look outward and consider the lessons and experiences from other countries to determine how to best expand Australia's existing deradicalisation programs.

In June 2014 the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, said "the biggest threat to national security [which] exists today is the return of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria".¹ Many governments and security agencies are concerned about the potential risks posed by 'fighters' returning home from the Syrian conflict with combat experience, radical ideologies and malicious intent. Recent reports from the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation,² along with Australia's own intelligence and security agencies, suggest there are as many as 12,000 non-Syrians participating in the Syrian civil war.³ While the vast majority (some 9,000) of these 'foreign fighters' come from the Middle East, 25 per cent (some 3,000) are believed to come from Western nations.⁴ Of these, approximately seventy are thought to be Australian, with a further twenty Australians believed to have already been killed in the conflict.⁵

¹ Andrew Marszal, 'Iraq Crisis: June 17 as it Happened', *The Telegraph*, <telegraph.co.uk> [Accessed 17 June 2014].

² Michael Steinbach, 'Statement before House Committee on Homeland Security', Federal Bureau of Investigation, 11 February 2015, <www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/the-urgent-threat-of-foreign-fighters-and-homegrown-terror> [Accessed 3 August 2015].

³ Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 'Opening Remarks: Senate Estimate Hearings' 11 December 2014, <www.aph.gov.au/~media/Committees/legcon_ctte/estimates/sup_1415/AGD/Hartland_ASIO_20141211.pdf> [Accessed 3 August 2015].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Andrew Zammit suggests that “there are well founded fears that some Australians fighting with them [extremist groups in Iraq and Syria] may return with deadly skills, connections and intentions”.⁶ The issue facing Australia is what do to with returning foreign fighters and how best to address the risks posed by individuals—both returning from Syria and also those still within Australia—who hold extremist views. Given the significance and urgency of these issues, a more robust discussion about Australia’s disengagement and deradicalisation programs is needed.

After providing an overview of relevant theory, this article assesses both Australian and foreign deradicalisation and disengagement programs. In assessing the efficacy of these programs, I identify aspects of foreign programs that could be used in future Australian deradicalisation efforts and suggest how these could be incorporated into Australia’s extant programs. The article concludes by arguing that while deradicalising and disengaging returning foreign fighters and violent extremists may not be easy or politically palatable, current trends suggest such efforts will inevitably be necessary. In looking to overseas programs of a similar nature, Australia can enhance the effectiveness of its own deradicalisation and disengagement programs.

Disengagement and Deradicalisation Theory

Deradicalisation and disengagement, like terrorism, are complex phenomena. Study of these issues involves a range of disciplines from psychology and sociology, to counter-terrorism, theology and national security.⁷ Perhaps because of this, the concept of deradicalisation is poorly defined⁷ and no one standard definition of deradicalisation exists.⁸ Further, the terms deradicalisation and disengagement are not mutually exclusive, as an individual can be disengaged but not deradicalised.⁹ For instance “many violent extremists may cease violent behaviour, but still hold strong anti-social ideas and political goals”.¹⁰

Jones describes deradicalisation as the “process of abandoning an extremist world view and concluding it is not acceptable to use violence [as a means of achieving ones aims]”.¹¹ Thus, deradicalisation is predominately focused on the psychological changes within an individual, such as a reinterpretation of

⁶ Zammit quoted in David Wroe, ‘Australians Fighting for Rebels in Iraq’, *The Canberra Times*, <canberratimes.com.au> [Accessed 19 June 2014].

⁷ Kate Barrelle, ‘Disengagement from Violent Extremism’, Global Terrorism Research Centre, Monash University, (2010), <hartsonline.monash.edu.au/radicalisation/files/2013/03/conference-2010-disengagement-from-violent-extremism-kb.pdf> [Accessed 3 August 2015], pp. 1-20.

⁸ Clarke Jones, ‘Terrorists Can Be Turned Around—Here’s How’, *The Drum*, <www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-08/jones-terrorists-can-be-turned-around/5796544> [Accessed 14 March 2015].

⁹ John Horgan, ‘De-Radicalisation or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2008), pp. 3-8.

¹⁰ Barrelle, ‘Disengagement from Violent Extremism’, p. 10.

¹¹ Jones, ‘Terrorists Can Be Turned Around—Here’s How’.

one's values and beliefs away from extremist views. By contrast, disengagement is focused on purely behavioural changes such as no longer using violence or materially supporting terrorism. Rather than resulting in a psychological shift and an abandonment of previous beliefs, disengagement results in an individual ceasing an undesired behaviour or choosing non-violent means of expressing their views.¹² Fink and Hearne describe disengagement as not necessitating a change of values and ideals, but rather rejecting the belief that violence is an acceptable way of realising these goals.¹³ While there will undoubtedly be some psychological changes within the individual through disengagement—as would be needed to change one's rationale to use violence—the main goal is to move the individual away from the support or use of violence.

While deradicalisation would be the utopian goal, in Australia, disengagement is a more practical aim.¹⁴ Firstly, as an open democratic society, Australia prides itself on freedom of speech and tolerance of others views. Secondly, even though shifting individuals' extremist beliefs to those of a more tolerant and peaceful existence would be the ultimate risk reduction measure, moving such individuals to the expression of their opinions via non-violent means is sufficient for the purposes of reducing the terrorism threat to Australia. In the end it is not so much the views of these individuals that pose the greatest concern, but rather their belief that violence is the only viable method to express them. For this reason, this article has a greater focus on disengagement than deradicalisation and will predominately refer to disengagement.

Pathways to Disengagement and Deradicalisation

The pathway to disengagement, like the pathway to radicalisation, is different for everyone.¹⁵ It is an idiosyncratic and individual process, and there is not a 'one-size-fits-all' model.¹⁶ As identified by Horgan "the reasons for *becoming* a terrorist, *staying* a terrorist, and then *disengaging* from

¹² Horgan, 'De-radicalisation or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation', p. 4.

¹³ Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2008), p. 3.

¹⁴ Clarke Jones, 'Turning Terrorists Around', Regulatory Institutions Network [Audio podcast]. <asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/podcasts/turning-terrorists-around#.VcvCQ17z6P8>.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2013); David R. Mandel, 'Radicalization: What Does It Mean?', in Thomas Pick, Anne Speckhard and Beatrice Jacuch (eds), *Home Grown Terrorism: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalisation among Groups with an Immigrant Heritage in Europe* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2009), pp. 101-13; Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009).

¹⁶ Clark Jones, 'Terrorists Can Be Turned Around—Here's How'.

terrorism were often different and context-specific".¹⁷ There is no one specific reason why an individual or group may disengage, but rather disengagement is the result of a culmination of factors which come together in a 'perfect storm'.¹⁸

"Leaving a terrorist group is an incremental process"¹⁹ and one that takes time.²⁰ Like radicalisation, an individual does not simply wake up one morning and suddenly become a violent extremist and in a similar vein, a violent extremist does not suddenly choose to abandon their previously strongly held beliefs.²¹ However, there do appear to be some similarities in how the processes commences.²² Fink and Hearne suggest that in order for the 'seed' of disengagement to be planted, a 'cognitive opening' must first occur, allowing for the individual to be receptive to new ideas.²³ This opening can be "triggered by a traumatic experience"²⁴ that "challenge[s] the coherence of the individual's worldview", or an external event that pushes the individual to question previously held ideas.²⁵ For example, the loss of a fellow group member or leader which may result in individuals questioning the theological support for their activities. The creation of a cognitive opening is only one part of the disengagement process: individuals must be motivated by other factors to give impetus to their disengagement or deradicalisation.

Once a cognitive opening has occurred, the push and pull factors described by Bjørge²⁶ and Barrelle²⁷ provide further motivation for an individual to pursue such change. In the context of disengagement, push factors refer to

¹⁷ Horgan, as quoted in Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 3. See also, John Horgan, 'Individual Disengagement: A Psychological Analysis', in Tore Bjørge and John Horgan (eds), *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁸ Royce Hutson, Taylor Long and Michael Page, 'Pathways to Violent Radicalisation in the Middle East: A Model for Future Studies of Transnational Jihad', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 154, no. 2 (2009), pp. 18-26.

¹⁹ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 3.

²⁰ Jones, 'Turning Terrorists Around'.

²¹ See, for example, Huston et al., 'Pathways to Violent Radicalisation in the Middle East'; Marieke Sloopman and Jean Tillie, *Processes of Radicalisation: Why some Amsterdam Muslims become Radicals* (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2006); Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*; Samuel J. Mullins, 'Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways Toward Terrorism and Genocide*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2010), pp. 162-93.

²² Amanda J. Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 2009, <www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a514433.pdf> [Accessed 4 August 2015], p. 9.

²³ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Renee Garfinkel, *Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace*, Special Report 186 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 11.

²⁶ Tore Bjørge, 'Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Extremist Groups: The Case of Racist Sub-Cultures', in Cheryl Benard, *A Future For The Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization* (Washington, DC: RAND National Security Research Division, 2005), pp. 9-16.

²⁷ Barrelle, 'Disengagement from Violent Extremism', p. 11.

those “negative social factors or consequences which make it unattractive and undesirable to stay” in one’s current circumstances, such as belonging to an extremist group.²⁸ Such factors might include, for example, a sense that the group has gone ‘too far’, disillusionment with the group and its cause, or negative social sanctions or experiences for group membership.²⁹ Conversely, pull factors are those factors which may attract or entice an individual away from a group or violent behaviours, toward a more rewarding alternative.³⁰ Pull factors are more extrinsic, such as “a longing for a normal life outside the group, pressure from partners and families to pursue other activities and increasing age, as well as a concern for future personal and socioeconomic wellbeing”.³¹

Importantly, Bjørgo also highlights that while there are a range of factors that may pull or push someone towards disengagement, there are also factors that inhibit disengagement. These include threats or reprisals from the group for leaving, and a perception of losing one’s identity or betraying one’s ‘family’. Because of negative connotations stemming from their association with extremists, a lack of viable options for individuals to pursue once they have separated from the group may also discourage disengagement.³² This is an important consideration, as where these factors are present they will need to be minimised or significantly compensated, in order to tip the balance of motivating factors towards those that facilitate disengagement.

COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL DISENGAGEMENT

How a violent extremist disengages can also be influenced by whether the process is occurring individually or as part of a collective group disengagement. Although both collective and individual disengagements occur there are varying rates of success between the two approaches, with individual attempts often more successful.³³ This appears largely due to the underlying factors motivating the individual to take action.

There are some examples which suggest that, given the right circumstances, group disengagement is possible. Success in this respect has been seen in Egypt, the Middle East and Colombia on several occasions,³⁴ however in all cases effective group disengagement was largely dependent on “strong charismatic leadership”,³⁵ as well as a hierarchical group structure.³⁶ As Barrelle suggests, some individuals will leave terrorism and extremist

²⁸ Bjørgo, ‘Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Extremist Groups’, p. 9.

²⁹ Sam Mullins, ‘Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology’.

³⁰ Bjørgo, ‘Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Extremist Groups’, p. 11.

³¹ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 3.

³² Bjørgo, ‘Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Extremist Groups’, p. 13.

³³ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mullins, ‘Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology’, p. 164.

³⁶ Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, p. 15.

ideologies by choice, others will be forced out by the group and still others will be forcibly removed by security agencies and law enforcement.³⁷ The goal for governments, security agencies and communities in this instance is therefore to identify and understand the factors that contribute to disengagement. By identifying and amplifying these factors, it may be possible to promote and leverage an individual's potential for disengagement, while at the same time encouraging other group members to follow. As examined further below, Australia has made some progress through its current disengagement initiatives. However, while existing programs appear promising and potentially effective, more still needs to be done.

Australian Disengagement Initiatives

Since 2010 and the development of the Countering Violent Extremism Strategy,³⁸ Australia has implemented a range of initiatives to counter violent extremism and build community cohesion.³⁹ These initiatives, largely facilitated at the state level and funded by the 'Building Community Resilience Grants Program', have been focused on early intervention strategies: developing community resilience and encouraging young people to move away from intolerant and radical ideologies.⁴⁰ While the vast majority of these programs are counter-radicalisation and prevention strategies, the Federal Government has also indicated that efforts are being made toward "work[ing] with state governments to support the disengagement of convicted terrorists".⁴¹

It is unclear how much of the Commonwealth Government's \$64 million "countering violent extremism and radicalisation package"⁴² (announced as part of the broader \$630 million counter-terrorism package in the *Mid-Year Fiscal and Economic Outlook 2014-15*) has been allocated specifically to disengagement initiatives. However, it seems likely that responsibility for such programs going forward will remain with the states and territories. While specific details of any existing disengagement programs are limited, Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh from Deakin University suggests that Australian disengagement programs are likely to have a strong emphasis on religious education, noting the propensity in Australia to assume that "radical

³⁷ Kate Barrelle, 'From Terrorist to Citizen'. Global Terrorism Research Centre, Monash University, (2011). <www.arts.monash.edu.au/politics/terror-research/--downloads/barrelle-2011-apsa-paper.pdf> [Accessed 4 August 2015], pp. 1-11.

³⁸ Sharhram Akbarzadeh, 'Investing in Mentoring and Educational Initiatives: The Limits of De-Radicalisation Programmes in Australia', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2013), pp. 451-63.

³⁹ It is worth noting that there is limited public information available on Australia's deradicalisation initiatives.

⁴⁰ Cat Barker, 'Australian Government Measures to Counter Violent Extremism: A Quick Guide', Department of Parliamentary Services: Research Paper Series, 2014-2015 (10 February 2015).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Muslims have a narrow and often inaccurate understanding of Islam and its principles".⁴³

With a growing number of Australians being radicalised and foreign fighter numbers growing, expansion of Australia's existing disengagement initiatives will be needed to address the increased risk posed by violent extremism in Australia. As discussed earlier, violent extremists and radicalised individuals do leave extremist groups. However, in order to fully capitalise on potential opportunities to disengage these individuals, Australia will need programs that are comprehensive, evidence-led and are capable of facilitating disengagement. In this context, the programs and initiatives used in other countries provide useful insights and lessons which could be used to expand upon Australia's existing disengagement programs and initiatives.

Overseas Disengagement and Deradicalisation Programs

Like Australia, many countries have recognised that to combat terrorism and violent extremism they need ways to disengage those who might use violence to achieve their aims. In the years that followed 9/11, many deradicalisation, disengagement and rehabilitation programs were established around the world.⁴⁴ While most of these programs were established initially in the Middle East, in more recent years Western nations such as Germany, Denmark, Norway and Britain have followed suit by either expanding existing deradicalisation and disengagement programs (aimed at far left and right wing extremists) to include religious extremism, or by developing specific programs directed at those involved in terrorism or religious extremism.

Notable differences exist between such programs in the Middle East, the West, and in Asia. For instance, programs in the Middle East and Southeast Asia tend to be prison-centric and have a greater focus on those in custody, presenting as the more 'hard-core' versions of deradicalisation and disengagement initiatives.⁴⁵ In comparison, programs in Europe include both softer community-based initiatives aimed at assisting those wanting to leave extremist groups, as well as more robust prison-based programs for those convicted of terrorism or violent extremism. This difference in approach highlights that when it comes to deradicalisation and disengagement programs, there is not a one-size-fits-all model.⁴⁶ Such

⁴³ Akbarzadeh, 'Investing in Mentoring and Educational Initiatives', p. 452.

⁴⁴ Jones, 'Turning Terrorists Around'.

⁴⁵ Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', p. 6.

⁴⁶ Peter R. Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries* (King's College London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2010), p. 49.

programs, if they are to be effective, need to be tailored to fit individual cultures and societies in order to successfully engage local extremists.⁴⁷

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS

Two of the more high-profile programs in the Middle East are those in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. These programs have been chosen as case studies due to their reported large number of participants and the subsequent larger data sets that may give more veracity their outcomes.

The Yemeni deradicalisation program was the first established to counter Islamic extremism.⁴⁸ Established in 2002, the Yemeni 'Committee for Dialogue' program⁴⁹ shows how violent extremists can be deradicalised and provides key lessons in program design and conduct.⁵⁰ Based on the premise that terrorism is built on a foundation of intellect and that any kind of intellectual idea can be defeated itself by intellect, the Committee for Dialogue emphasised dialogue and debate and encouraged participants to challenge the "legitimacy of the Yemeni government, the permissibility of killing non-Muslims, and the appropriate [use] of jihad".⁵¹

Although the Yemeni program achieved some success it also experienced a number of failures. These were predominately due to the design of the program, which did not include effective after-care or adequate post-program surveillance. It also made several operational mistakes by only including "security detainees suspected of being involved with Islamic extremism and the program relied on voluntary participation", but did not include actual 'terrorists' or those who may have been involved in violence.⁵² It was also made clear to detainees upfront that through their participation in the program they may be able to secure early release. This resulted in some detainees 'faking change' or 'currying favour' to reduce their sentences.⁵³

The other significant factor that ultimately led to the Yemeni program being declared a failure in 2005 was that the program did not provide support mechanisms for detainees upon release.⁵⁴ Although there are suggestions that offers of post-release employment were made to some, many detainees found that these offers were unfounded, leaving them disillusioned and ultimately undoing any progress that had been achieved during the program. Another failure of the Yemeni program was that participants were required to

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', p. 20.

⁴⁹ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', p. 21.

⁵¹ Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', p. 21.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

promise not to commit acts of terrorism on Yemeni soil. Consequently, because of these failures, a significant number of participants were rearrested for violence and terrorism related offences.⁵⁵

If the Yemeni program was considered a failure, then the Saudi program could be viewed as its slightly richer and better-established cousin. However, despite having a more comprehensive approach, the outcomes of the Saudi program are arguably no better than those achieved by the Yemeni program. Despite this, the Saudi experience provides an opportunity to consider how different program components can affect deradicalisation and disengagement.

The Saudi program, established in 2003, operated on the premise that terrorists and violent extremists could ultimately be deradicalised by a combination of “force, money and ideology”.⁵⁶ It presumed that “terrorists’ views were the result of mistaken interpretations of Islam” and, to this end, considered extremists as victims who has been led astray from the true path of Islam.⁵⁷ The Saudi program was based on the notions of redemption, support and re-education.

Recognising the multifaceted nature of terrorism (and deradicalisation), the Saudi program tied together three main elements: the idea that radical ideology can be defeated by reason and debate, the need to support families and operate within Saudi culture, and that participants needed to be supported upon release through after-care programs to facilitate reintegration into society.⁵⁸ With this in mind the Saudi program offered a range of incentives and support mechanisms. For instance, families of participants were given financial and other material support to foster goodwill and a sense of commitment to the state,⁵⁹ while participants were offered vocational training as well as employment opportunities upon release.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in some cases, participants were also provided assistance to find a life partner and start a family, with the idea being that by increasing a participant’s commitment to their family, it decreased their commitment to extremism.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁶ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁸ Boucek, ‘Counter-Terrorism from Within: Assessing Saudi Arabia’s Religious Rehabilitation and Disengagement Programme’, *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 153, no. 6 (2008), p. 61. See also Walid Phares, *The War of Ideas: Jihadism against Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Chapter 12, *Inflaming Hearts and Fooling Minds*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, p. 53.

⁶⁰ Mullins, ‘Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology’, p. 169.

⁶¹ Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, p. 35.

In addition to providing a comprehensive range of incentives and support mechanisms, the Saudi provision of ongoing post-release support appears to have contributed positively to its effectiveness compared to other Middle East programs of a similar nature. By recognising that ongoing support and monitoring was critical to preventing recidivism, the Saudi program found a way to continue the progression of participants toward deradicalisation “well beyond the prison walls”.⁶²

Despite what the Saudi program was able to achieve, it was not without shortcomings. The Saudi program only engaged those in the custody of the state and, within this group, it only permitted detainees suspected of supporting terrorism to participate (rather than those convicted of actual terrorist offences).⁶³ Because of this, the program ignored a significant subset of individuals who were arguably in need of disengagement (even if they were likely the tougher cases). While not contributing directly to the program’s outcomes, this does raise questions as to whether the program specifically avoided the ‘hard-core’ violent extremists because they were too difficult and would have driven the success rate down.⁶⁴

THE INDONESIAN DERADICALISATION PROGRAM

Similar to the Yemeni and Saudi programs, the Indonesian program is predominantly prison-based and focused on the individual. It centres on changing attitudes toward violence by providing counselling and mechanisms for ideological debate, vocational training and education, as well as support to the participants and their families.⁶⁵ Unlike the Saudi program, which uses Islamic clerics to challenge ideological beliefs, the Indonesian authorities believe that terrorists will not listen to moderates or external third parties, regardless of their knowledge. Accordingly, Indonesian authorities have used former terrorist leaders and ex-prisoners who are considered to have greater credibility among the terrorists with whom they are trying to deradicalise.⁶⁶

Anna Johnston suggests that unlike the Yemeni and Saudi programs—which treat terrorists as misguided victims and challenges program participants to show how their beliefs are valid within Islam—the Indonesian program argues not that terrorists are wrong in their beliefs, but rather that now is not the right time for violence.⁶⁷ This suggests the Indonesian program is

⁶² Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*.

⁶³ Boucek, ‘Counter-Terrorism from Within’, pp. 60-65.

⁶⁴ While the Saudi Government claimed a recidivism rate of only 1-2 per cent, these figures are difficult to independently verify, particularly noting that the “Saudi’s do not release data on re-offenders”. See also, for example, Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, p. 37; Boucek, ‘Counter-Terrorism from Within’, p. 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, ‘*Deradicalisation’ and Indonesian Prisons*, Asia Report No. 142 (International Crisis Group, 19 November 2007), p. 12.

⁶⁷ Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, p. 41.

perhaps focused less on deradicalisation and more on disengagement. There are likely many reasons for this approach and whether it is intentional (as a means of dealing with only the immediate problem to achieve faster results), or the result of insufficient funding and inadequate resourcing, remains to be seen.

Despite this, the Indonesian program has had some success in encouraging terrorists to deradicalise or at the very least disengage. By using socioeconomic incentives, which one Indonesian official suggested are more effective than any ideological counselling, the Indonesian authorities have persuaded some extremists to abandon violence.⁶⁸ Indonesian police have also used the deradicalisation program as a means of changing terrorist attitudes toward Indonesian law enforcement and security agencies.⁶⁹ As a means of bridging the 'us and them' divide, police, through the use of kinder interactions, building rapport and showing compassion, have attempted to break down barriers and challenge extremists' perceptions that the police themselves are non-believers.⁷⁰

WESTERN PROGRAMS

Among Western nations, a range of programs offer further insights into disengagement efforts, in addition to examples of different program structures and effectiveness. These programs include those offered by Sweden, Germany and Denmark.⁷¹ Unlike Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Indonesia, whose main concern is religious extremism, European countries have contended with far left and right wing extremism for some time. Many of these countries, rather than developing new programs, are expanding existing programs and initiatives to take into account a growing number religiously extremist groups.

Two programs, EXIT-Deutschland (Germany) and EXIT-Fryshuset (Sweden), "work with individuals to leave behind extremist ideologies, groups and movements. They attempt to change both the belief structures of individuals (deradicalisation) as well as the behavioural aspects (disengagement)".⁷² These programs, similar to the disengagement and deradicalisation programs offered by Yemen and Saudi Arabia, include measures such as counselling, education, vocational training, mentoring,

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 13, 1 .

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, *'Deradicalisation' and Indonesian Prisons*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*

⁷¹ While not discussed in this article it is acknowledged that the first of the 'Exit' programs was that from Norway, founded by Tore Bjørge. This program was in turn replicated in Germany and Sweden, with all programs borrowing heavily from one another.

⁷² Vidhyra Ramalingam and Henry Tuck, *The Need for Exit Programmes: Why Deradicalisation and Disengagement Matters in the UK's Approach to Far-Right Violence* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014). p. 4.

family support and assistance in reintegrating back into the community.⁷³ Remarkably, these programs have had high success rates, with EXIT-Deutschland reporting a recidivism rate of less than 5 per cent and EXIT-Fryshuset a recidivism rate of less than 6 per cent.⁷⁴

While EXIT-Deutschland and EXIT-Fryshuset are community based, Germany's 'Violence Prevention Network' (VPN) is a program centred on assisting incarcerated individuals to leave extremist groups.⁷⁵ Similar to EXIT-Deutschland, VPN offers a multifaceted and individually tailored program, with a twenty-three-week prison-based program aimed at "disentangling the individual's sense of anger and hatred from their political view of the world".⁷⁶ It also includes counselling and family assistance, as well as a year of dedicated post-release support including ongoing monitoring, counselling, and assistance finding accommodation and employment.⁷⁷

Evaluation Of Overseas Programs

The disengagement programs examined above have provided insights into how other countries have attempted to tackle the complex challenge of disengaging violent extremists and radicalised individuals. If Australian programs are to be expanded and offer effective means of disengagement, then it is likely they will need to include some components of the programs assessed above. The following section considers the different elements that appear to be necessary components of effective disengagement programs.

BREAKING SOCIAL TIES

There are a number of reasons for focusing on prisons for disengagement programs. Beside from the obvious consideration that detainees are essentially 'captive audiences',⁷⁸ disengagement has been found to be more effective when individuals are removed from the radicalised group environment and are no longer influenced by peers or group leaders.⁷⁹ As suggested earlier, disengagement can be facilitated by numerous push and pull factors, but in order for disengagement to succeed, there must be a cognitive opening which "challenges the coherence of an individual's [extremist or radical] world view".⁸⁰ Apprehension and detention could be potentially effective ways of creating these cognitive openings. Incarceration

⁷³ Riazat Butt and Henry Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation: A Comparative Evaluation of Approaches in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Germany* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014), pp. 12-13.

⁷⁴ Ramalingam and Tuck, *The Need for Exit Programmes*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ Butt and Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation*, pp. 20-21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

⁷⁸ Mullins, 'Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology', p. 166.

⁷⁹ Johnston, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists', p. 10.

⁸⁰ Garfinkel, *Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace*, p. 11.

can break the social ties which may have led to extremism and act as both a circuit breaker and an enabling factor in disengagement, but prisons can also be conducive environments for radicalisation to occur and in some cases incarceration can work against disengagement initiatives.⁸¹

Within Australia, there are relatively few individuals incarcerated for violent extremism or terrorism related offences: some twenty-six convictions from thirty-five prosecutions at the time of writing.⁸² While this number may increase if foreign fighters return from Iraq and Syria, there will still be many individuals in the community who could participate in community-based (i.e. non-prison) disengagement programs. The EXIT-Deutschland and EXIT-Fryshuset programs suggest it may be possible to achieve similar outcomes as those achieved in prisons, provided individuals are given the opportunity to self-segregate and remove themselves from radical and extremist influences. In the EXIT-Fryshuset program this was achieved by basing the program at a youth centre which offered a location for participants to attend outside of their normal environments. Aside from providing a physical mechanism to break social ties, the youth centre also provided social support and integration with a wider youth program and leisure activities, thus creating opportunities for individuals to establish alternate social networks and further break an individual's reliance on extremist groups for social support.⁸³

Given Australian demographics, it will be important to have available disengagement programs for those not only in the custody of the state, but also those in the community. If structured effectively, incarcerated extremists could transition from a prison-based program to a community-based program after their release. Alternatively, the use of community-based 'camps' or 'retreats', or live-in rehabilitation facilities (similar to those used to combat drug and alcohol addiction) could also be effective in Australia.

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT AND INCENTIVES

As the literature and case studies have demonstrated, successful disengagement required participants to have extensive counselling, mentoring and education support from trained individuals. However, it is important to note that support can also be in the form of incentives.

The Saudi program showed how incentives, particularly those directed toward a participant's family, can have a significant impact on disengagement outcomes. There appear to be no hard and fast rules about what constitutes an 'incentive' and the disengagement programs discussed

⁸¹ Jones, 'Turning Terrorists Around'.

⁸² Nicola McGarrity, 'Let the Punishment Meet the Offence': Determining Sentences for Australian Terrorists', p. 1.

⁸³ Butt and Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation*, pp. 10-14.

suggest incentives could take the form of paying for children's school fees, covering medical costs, providing food or setting a family up with a small business.⁸⁴

Incentives can be effective for a number of reasons. Firstly, they can motivate an individual to participate in, and more importantly complete, a disengagement program. Extremists—much like the rest of society—are more likely to take part in a program if there is incentive, beyond just leaving extremism behind, to be gained from participating. Such incentives might include money, training, or early release. Secondly, in using family support and assistance as an incentive, an individual trying to disengage can ensure their family's needs are addressed, thus removing the stress and emotional burden of providing for ones' family while in prison. This type of incentive also serves as a secondary function to deradicalisation, as it means the terrorist is no longer dependent on the terrorist group for material and financial support. Finally, by offering participants the incentive of gaining vocational skills, those wanting to disengage are given a chance to better themselves, thus improving their own self-perception as well as in many cases, their standing within their community. Vocational and educational skills can also facilitate disengagement by providing those wanting to move away from extremism with legitimate means to provide gainfully for their families and, in turn, a sense of purpose and community belonging.⁸⁵

While incentives and support initiatives like those offered under the Saudi program appear to contribute positively to disengagement, consideration within an Australian context must be given to both practical implications and public opinion. Although many in the community would embrace initiatives to combat terrorism, material incentives for violent extremists and convicted terrorists are unlikely to be palatable in many countries. In Australia this would likely mean that the use of such initiatives would be significantly restricted, even though any government that ignored this option would be putting politics before good policy.

Furthermore, the motivations of any program participant would have to be carefully evaluated as to whether such individuals were genuine in their desire to disengage, or whether participation in a disengagement program was only to obtain incentives.

⁸⁴ Christopher Boucek, 'Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia', *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation), vol. 5, no. 16 (16 August 2007).

⁸⁵ Mullins, 'Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology', p. 169. See also, for example, Scott Helfstein, *Edges of Radicalisation: Ideas, Individuals and Networks in Violent Extremism* (West Point: The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, US Department of Defense, 2012); Huston et al., 'Pathways to Violent Radicalisation in the Middle East'; Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*.

ADDRESSING THE CAUSES

Within Australia there is an underlying assumption that “radical Muslims have a narrow and often inaccurate understanding of Islam and its principles”.⁸⁶ As Jones highlights, there are more causes to radicalisation than religion and, within Australia, radicalisation is more the result of social and connection issues than it is religion.⁸⁷ Despite the stereotypes, religion is the form through which extremist ideologies are expressed, rather than the root cause of radicalisation. With this in mind, while religion will still be a key feature (as inaccurate interpretations of religious principles will need to be addressed),⁸⁸ disengagement programs will need to also focus on other underlying causes of violent extremism and the factors that draw individuals to radicalisation.

Another key element to facilitating disengagement is the use of credible leaders and interlocutors to help participants address underlying causes of their extremism. The Saudi program highlighted that using the right type of interlocutor is critical and that care needs to be taken in selecting interlocutors that are both knowledgeable in their subject matter and are able to gain the respect of the participants. Conversely, the Indonesian deradicalisation program demonstrated the impact that poor interlocutor selection can have on program participants, potentially reversing progress towards disengagement and in some cases amplifying extremist ideologies. In Australia the use of credible interlocutors to facilitate programs may prove more difficult than in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Yemen, particularly noting the absence of prominent Islamic leaders and reformed extremists. In this regard, it may be necessary to consider using community and peer groups, and in some instances respected family members, to fulfil this role.

ONGOING SUPPORT AND MENTORING

While it is promising for participants to make positive progress toward disengagement within the confines of a structured program, where support is at its maximum and the pressures of ‘normal life’ are minimal, once individuals leave such programs they likely to be faced with the same economic and social circumstances that contributed toward their initial radicalisation. Thus, any disengagement program in Australia will need to contain practicable and comprehensive after-care and monitoring programs which provide both material and non-material support.

⁸⁶ Akbarzadeh, ‘Investing in Mentoring and Educational Initiatives’, p. 452.

⁸⁷ Jones, ‘Terrorists Can Be Turned Around—Here’s How’.

⁸⁸ Noting the prominence of religion in extremist propaganda and recruiting strategies, as well as its use to justify extremists’ violent behaviours, engaging programs participants through religion and framing counter arguments with a religious base is also likely to be effective. Additionally, by using religion as medium to facilitate disengagement, participants may also be able to develop a sounder understanding of their religion and through which be less easily persuaded by radical ideologies, taking away the power of extremist groups to use religion as a means to justify the use of violence.

The Yemeni, Saudi and Indonesian deradicalisation programs illustrate the importance of after-care and monitoring. Yemen and Indonesia—both lacking effective after-care programs—have had significantly less success than in deradicalising terrorists than Saudi Arabia. The Saudi program includes extensive after-care and monitoring, including a ‘half-way house’, ongoing financial assistance, access to mentors and a parole-like requirement (where individuals are required to report to authorities on a regular basis). Johnston, Mullins, and Fink and Hearne have also suggested that of all of the elements that contribute to the disengagement of radicalised individuals and violent extremists, ongoing after-care and monitoring programs are the most significant to successful disengagement.⁸⁹

The need for ongoing support and mentoring was also evident in the programs delivered out of Sweden and Germany, where participants of one program were provided with twelve months dedicated individual support following completion of the program.⁹⁰ These programs found that a key need of those individuals wanting to disengage from extremist groups was the ability to call on assistance at any moment, as typically such individuals will not “have anyone else to turn to as they have often broken ties with family and friends when they entered the movement”.⁹¹ In addition to this, Jones suggests that the development of mentoring relationships between participants and program officials is likely to aid in the building of trust and increase the chances of disengagement.⁹² This again supports the notion that providing an alternate support network outside of extremist groups—and decreasing a participant’s reliance on extremist groups for a sense of connection, identity and purpose—can have positive results.⁹³

The use of effective after-care programs will also be of particular importance for those participants in prison-based disengagement programs—particularly when used as a means of facilitating participants’ integration back into the community and preventing recidivism. Not only will these programs need to provide comprehensive support, such as counselling and mentoring, but they will also need to help reinforce newfound attitudes and beliefs developed through disengagement programs. Additionally, after-care and monitoring programs can also serve as a surveillance tool by providing regular observation of released participants and opportunity to identify any signs of recidivism.

⁸⁹ Johnston, ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalisation Programmes on Islamist Extremists’, pp. 61-62. See also, for example, Mullins, ‘Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology’; Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*.

⁹⁰ Butt and Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation*, pp. 20-21.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹² Jones, ‘Terrorists Can Be Turned Around—Here’s How’.

⁹³ See, for example, Helfstein, *Edges of Radicalisation: Ideas, Individuals and Networks in Violent Extremism*; Huston et al., ‘Pathways to Violent Radicalisation in the Middle East’; Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*.

CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The notion of neutralising the threat posed by violent extremists is appealing; however, there are a number of challenges and practical implications of using disengagement programs to do so. Firstly, as demonstrated by the Saudi programs, disengagement programs require sufficient financial and material resources. It appears there are no half-measures when it comes to funding disengagement programs: it is likely to be an 'all or nothing' affair. Secondly, disengagement programs are likely to be significantly affected by political climates and must walk a fine line between achieving effective disengagement and also being seen as 'punishing' those convicted of terrorism related offences. To this end, in some circumstances, cash payments and material support to convicted individuals and their families may be impracticable, particularly in Western countries.

Thirdly, of the disengagement programs examined, none were mandatory (though arguably those participating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia may not have had much of a choice) and all required participants to volunteer. This circles back to the notion of cognitive openings and the concept that in order for individuals to be disengaged, they must first be willing to hear alternate ideas and accept the support on offer. Forced participation is unlikely to achieve either the desired results or positive outcomes and, in many cases, may harden the radical views of those forced to participate.⁹⁴ Finally, as highlighted by the International Peace Institute, expecting a 100 per cent disengagement rate from such programs is unrealistic.⁹⁵ In this regard, one of the challenges of disengagement programs is defining and measuring their effectiveness, particularly noting that a single failure may prompt some critics to argue that the program should be abandoned. While assessing the recidivism rate is one way to do this, it is, in and of itself, a difficult and complex factor to measure (particularly when considering the intangible nature of disengagement).⁹⁶

Lessons for Australia

"No single formula can deal with all cases of violent extremism in a single region ... and there is no single recipe for success."⁹⁷ However, in light of the increased threat posed by returning foreign fighters and evidence from the case studies discussed above, Australia should consider expanding its existing disengagement programs. If it does so, there are several key

⁹⁴ Tinka Veldhuis, *Designing Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for Violent Extremist Offenders: A Realist Approach*, ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 2012).

⁹⁵ Fink and Hearne, *Beyond Terrorism*, p. 12.

⁹⁶ Veldhuis, *Designing Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for Violent Extremist Offenders*.

⁹⁷ Hamed El-Said, *De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States* (King's College London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012).

lessons that can be learned from European, Asian and Middle Eastern programs.

Firstly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Australia will need to consider specific and tailored programs to meet the individual needs of returning foreign fighters and other extremists. Just as the path to radicalisation is an individual process, so too is the process of disengagement. Having a range of options to select from—depending on the needs of the individual—will be important in any Australian program. For instance, where one participant may need extensive counselling and social support, another may require more vocational assistance and religious guidance. Access to jobs, education, vocational training, housing and family assistance will all need to be considered and offered in some form.

Secondly, Australia will need to take a dual approach to disengagement: it will need a combination of custodial and community-based programs. These will need to be comprehensive and offer a ‘cradle to grave’ approach, providing ongoing support and mentoring for extended periods of time. Evidence from the Saudi program, as well as the EXIT programs provided by Germany and Sweden, indicates that long-term support from program staff and mentors is critical to successful disengagement and preventing recidivism.

Thirdly, any disengagement program expansions in Australia will need to be well funded, adequately resourced and sustainable. This will require bi-partisan political support, the cooperation of multiple agencies and a whole of government approach “supported by consciously designed policy”.⁹⁸ A long-term commitment to delivery which is centred on best practice, and is resilient to political manoeuvring and interference, will be needed in order to offer sustainable programs over several years. A reactive and short-term program will do little to address the potential threats posed by returning foreign fighters and violent extremists. Further, there is the potential that short-term programs could make matters worse if it is perceived that communities have been abandoned through government’s lack of commitment.

Community involvement is also going to be a necessary aspect of any Australian deradicalisation and disengagement program. As suggested by El-Said, “states do not have all the tools” needed for effective disengagement programs,⁹⁹ and civil societies—who not only have wider reach into ‘closed’ communities but also more resources—can be leveraged to increase the scope and effectiveness of programs.¹⁰⁰ Community leaders may also be able to provide valuable insight in program design and

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

structure, as well as be an important resource for identifying interlocutors and program leaders.

Conclusion

Australia, like many Western countries, is facing a significant potential threat from returning foreign fighters and other extremists. Addressing this threat will require several different approaches, working in unison as part of an overall effective and comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. Australia urgently needs improved disengagement programs because, as Horgan and Taylor suggest, the potential of effective the risk reduction is high.¹⁰¹ The expansion of Australia's disengagement programs, while not the be all and end all of solutions to Australia's terrorism woes, is a good a place to start. To this end, looking outward to other nations who have implemented disengagement programs can provide useful insights into how Australia can expand, enhance and further develop its own disengagement programs.

As demonstrated by the deradicalisation and disengagement programs above, with sufficient resources, funding and long-term commitment to success, it may be possible to disengage returning foreign fighters and those individuals involved in terrorism and extremism. These programs provide valuable insights into what works when it comes to disengagement, and equally as important, the programs also provide valuable lessons as to what does not work. From the programs of other nations it is possible to establish how Australia can enhance its own disengagement programs.

There are obviously challenges to disengaging those with extremist ideologies: changing someone's fundamental beliefs is no easy task. It will take the cooperation and participation of multiple agencies and organisations, as well as significant community involvement and support, to achieve this goal. However, if Australia is to combat terrorism and the potential threat posed by returning foreign fighters, something more than what exists presently will be needed. Disengaging returning foreign fighters, violent extremists and radicalised individuals may not be easy, but it certainly is necessary. With the right circumstances and programs that are evidence-led, have rigorous frameworks and are informed by sound understanding of the factors and processes that underpin disengagement, Australia can maximise its chances of successful addressing the ongoing threat of extremism.

Kristen Bell previously served in the Australian Army and has completed a Master of Arts (Terrorism, Safety and Security) and is currently completing a Master of Arts (Intelligence Analysis) at the Australian Graduate School of Policing and Security, Charles Sturt University. kristenbell@bigpond.com

¹⁰¹ John Horgan and Max Taylor, 'Disengagement, De-Radicalisation and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research', in Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 174.