



DERADICALISATION: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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To combat extremist ideologies and the threat of mass radicalisation, experts have developed a series of research in order to identify and understand the factors that lead to the radicalisation of an individual, but also the factors that, having an opposite effect, can lead to its deradicalisation. Therefore, more and more authors recognize the importance of studying the process of deradicalisation and its potential for today's society. Hence, the paper aims to further address this process by presenting specific terminology, theoretical and practical models of deradicalisation, and signalling difficulties and limitations during the development of national disengagement and deradicalisation programs caused by the lack of practical information on the results of these initiatives.

Keywords: *extremism; radicalisation; deradicalisation; disengagement; depluralization.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of radicalisation is an increasingly present problem in today's society, reaching the attention of the general public, especially since the emergence of the terrorist group Islamic State. Although there are many studies and articles on the subject of radicalisation, very few offer a solution to this threat. Therefore, studies on deradicalisation and disengagement are few and do not receive the attention they deserve from the international community.

In fact, there are few authors who have studied the subject of deradicalisation, and among them we mention John Horgan, Daniel Koehler, Jessica Stern and Kate Barrelle, on whose research this paper is based. It seeks to establish a general

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theoretical framework applicable to extremism. All these authors are aware that deradicalisation is one of the least studied topics, although its importance is undeniable, and they signal the need for in-depth research and studies. Therefore, this paper aims to introduce the general concepts of *disengagement* and *deradicalisation*, and to identify a series of *push and pull* factors that can lead to deradicalisation of an individual, but also to present some models of deradicalisation, both theoretical and used in practice. At the same time, the paper seeks to draw attention to the difficulty of continuing research on deradicalisation, in part because of the lack of practical information on the results of deradicalisation initiatives, but also because of the lack of attention towards them.

The topic will be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective, using theories and models that belong to areas of research such as criminology, psychology and psychoanalysis, but which are relevant and contribute to a better understanding of the processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation.

1. General Conceptual Framework

Disengagement is a behavioural, physical change of the individual (from criminal to non-criminal), who gives up armed and/or behavioural violence and becomes peaceful, as he/her no longer engages in violent actions (Koehler 2017, 3). However, this change refers only to the behaviour of the individual, not to his ideology and beliefs; these elements do not necessarily change, but, at best, undergo some process of fading. Thus, the individual is no longer determined to act violently, but this change does not necessarily lead to an alteration of the radical ideology.

Disengagement can be both a voluntary process (the individual wants to give up the violent lifestyle) and an involuntary one (the individual is captured or arrested by the authorities or killed in battle) (Koehler 2017, 14). Capturing or killing an individual blocks his or her ability to act violently, but arrest does not affect the cessation of violence, and individuals who have been incarcerated usually resume their violent and radical lifestyle they had prior to their arrest. For example, the detention and incarceration of a terrorist has no long-term effect, being only an immediate solution to this problem. As the arrest and life imprisonment of all terrorists is not only unlikely but also counterproductive, as there are not enough detention centres to house them in large numbers, their permanent isolation is not possible.

Kate Barrelle believes that sustained disengagement refers to the individual's commitment to society after he or she leaves the extremist organization, calling this process *pro-integration* (Barrelle 2015, 129). This non-linear process consists of three stages of behavioural and identity change: *the reduction, after desertion, of the identity associated with the group, the emergence of a new identity and the*



finding of a new group or entities the individual identifies with (Koehler 2017, 25). Thus, there is a two-way process of disengagement or deradicalisation: distancing oneself from radical life and engaging in a non-extremist environment (Koehler 2017, 80). However, this model does not focus on the psychological changes that underlie disengagement.

Deradicalisation, on the other hand, represents both a behavioural change in the sense of renouncing violence, and an ideological one, the term referring to an “individual or collective cognitive change from criminal, radical or extremist identities to a non-criminal or moderate psychological state” (Koehler 2017, 2). Thus, as John Horgan points out, deradicalisation involves both a physical and a mental change of the individual, who believes that “there is no indication that disengagement has the effect of deradicalisation” (Horgan 2008, 8). Moreover, the disengagement of the individual, but without its deradicalisation, increases the chances of recidivism, especially in the case of religiously motivated terrorists, who are prone to recidivism and return to violent behaviour (Koehler 2017, 14).

If *depluralization* (defining specific religious or political issues by contextualizing them using the experience and past of the individual in order to connect global or abstract issues with specific micro-events) (Koehler 2017, 71-76) is the engine of radicalisation, a reverse process is needed, meaning a *repluralization* of political concepts and values, this process referring to an “individual psychological distancing from a specific extremist or radical ideology” (Koehler 2017, 81). According to Koehler, the process of deradicalisation must be personalized for each individual, taking into account both the individual process of radicalisation and the psychological and external factors that triggered radicalisation (Koehler 2017, 81).

2. Factors and Models of Deradicalisation

An extremely important element that leads to disengagement and/or deradicalisation is a “special and often even traumatic event to create a cognitive opening and reconsideration of a person’s involvement in a radical or extremist group” (Koehler 2017, 15), so that the individual begins to question his membership in the extremist group or organization. There is a process of analysis of personal values, self-analysis and introspection in the mind of the individual, a process that can have the effect of leaving the organization and disengaging, as well as, in some cases, deradicalisation. Studies of this individual process have shown that individuals who leave a terrorist organization are usually not motivated by a single traumatic event, but by many such events that, put together, create insecurity and uncertainty (Koehler 2017, 71-76).

Push factors, i.e. the factors that push the individual to leave the organization,



are usually related to the internal dynamics of the organization, being defined as representing “negative circumstances and social events that make membership in the organization uncomfortable and unattractive” (Bjorgo 2016, 234). Daniel Koehler presents a list of these factors: *negative social sanctions and stigma associated with membership, distrust of group ideology, frustration with hypocrisy and group behaviour, loss of group social support, role migration, or even loss of status in the organization* (according to Hwang’s analysis, in the case of Indonesian jihadists, this factor may also involve a cost-benefit logic regarding group involvement and commitment, which can have the effect of leaving the group and disengaging the individual (Hwang 2015, 11-14), *psychological and physical abuse by the group members, disappointment with the outcome of armed conflict and the effects of violence, tactical differences regarding various operations, disapproval of group or leadership strategies, unfulfilled expectations, cognitive dissonance* (“cognitive mental struggle when presented with new information or experiences that conflict with their existing beliefs, values or ideals” (Koehler 2017, 18).

Pull factors are those “positive factors that attract individuals to a more profitable alternative” (Bjorgo 2016, 234) and can be both external factors and internal desires. Thus, Daniel Koehler analyses the following *pull factors*: *the desire to live a normal life, the experience of events that change the life and priorities of the individual, old age, the desire to start a family, the intervention or pressure from family members, new positive relationships with movements or people outside the group, career prospects, changing socio-political environment* (socio-political motives that led to violence are no longer relevant) (Koehler 2017, 18-19). *Push and pull factors* must lead to the re-pluralization of the individual’s beliefs and opinions, thus triggering the process of deradicalisation.

In his analysis of the causes of Indonesian jihadists’ disengagement, Hwang identifies six factors that lead to leaving a terrorist organization (Hwang 2015, 15). Although some of these factors were mentioned earlier, the fact that Hwang came to almost the same conclusion by analysing the testimonies of jihadists is relevant to our research, giving it more objectivity and credibility of the arguments. Thus, these factors are: *disappointment with tactics, leadership or other aspects of the group, realizing that the price of continuing actions is too high, establishing or re-establishing relationships with individuals or networks outside the jihadist circle, family pressure, changing personal and professional priorities, humane treatment by the authorities* (Hwang 2015, 15).

The list of these factors is not exhaustive, as individuals are very different from each other, so the reasons that lead to radicalisation and, subsequently, to leaving the terrorist organization can be extremely different. Therefore, determining and analysing the reasons that led to radicalisation and leaving the organization can be the basis of the individual strategy for disengaging the individual, this process



can have the effect of both deradicalisation of the person and his reintegration into society.

However, it is necessary to take into account the so-called *inhibitory factors* (Koehler 2017, 20), because they can prevent the desertion from the terrorist organization. Daniel Koehler identifies *negative sanctions from the group* as the main inhibitory factor, with social pressure on members of the organization not to provide information to third parties (media, authorities, people outside the group), to comply with the group's internal rules and, of course, not to desert. Any of the above-mentioned actions that an individual can take to betray the trust of the group may result in sanctions from the group members, such as "disappointment, prosecution, death threats, physical assault, harassment, verbal threats, contempt, and even murder" (Koehler 2017, 20). To these can be added blackmail of any kind and the spread of false rumours about the deserter that can make it considerably more difficult for him to reintegrate into society, as well as the loss of group protection, ostracism and torture (Koehler 2017, 20).

Koehler conducted a study showing that when faced with a case of desertion, the group has two staged reactions: emotional (shock, anger, betrayal, fear, etc.), and logical (reflecting and further establishing the strategy so that the group is not endangered). In this second stage, the group takes action against the deserter, and Koehler states that most defamation and ostracism campaigns aimed at deserters are focused on topics such as "psychological disorders, alcoholism, ideological instability, corruption and bribery through government agencies, drugs, depression, fear of government repression, homosexuality and paedophilia" (Koehler 2017, 23), which can be followed by crime and murder.

Rusbult's 1983 model of investment is taken over by Horgan and applied to the study of deradicalisation, resulting in the idea that massive investment in the organization and lack of alternatives lead to increased commitment and loyalty, and lack of investment and lack of alternatives result in lack of commitment and loyalty to the group (Koehler 2017, 24).

Another interesting model with a general applicability is the one involving the role change made by Helen Ebaugh in 1988, based on interviews with ordinary people who have undergone a change in their lives, which has also led to a change in their role. In a first stage, Ebaugh identifies a *doubt about the role of the individual* (Koehler 2017, 49) as a result of events that had a relative impact; the second stage refers to the *search for alternatives* (Koehler 2017, 49), Ebaugh stating that negative reactions from third parties can end the process, while positive reactions can encourage it; the third stage is represented by *the crossroads* (Koehler 2017, 49), and in the last stage the *role of former* (Koehler 2017, 49) (former detainee, former doctor, etc.) will be created. Ebaugh also identifies the so-called "residues of the role" (Koehler 2017, 49), referring to the elements that belonged to the



former identity, but which are still active even after the change. These residues are important for the study of deradicalisation, as they can cause the individual to re-engage in violent actions even after deradicalisation.

At the same time, it is worth considering Klandermans' model, as presented in Koehler's paper, a model that distinguishes between three forms of commitment to an extremist group. Thus, there is a *moral obligation* to be part of the organization or *normative commitment* (Koehler 2017, 24), representing "the result of a socialization and learning process shaping the individual normative (values and ideas) framework in congruence with the group's ideology" (Koehler 2017, 24), this commitment being the key mechanism of radicalisation. Also, there is an *emotional attachment* to the organization or *affective commitment* (Koehler 2017, 24), based on the feeling of belonging to a group and resulting in an increased involvement. However, we can talk about a *continuance commitment* (Koehler 2017 24), depending on what the individual invested in the organization and the alternatives it may have. In this case, he/she is making a cost-benefit analysis of his/her membership to the group (refers to Rusbult's model of the relationship between investment, alternatives and the degree of involvement in the group's actions).

Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen establishes a relationship between push and pull factors and Klandermans' model. She believes there are multiple factors that have the effect of corroding each type of engagement described above. Thus, the *doubt about the ideology of the group* (Koehler 2017, 24-25) affects the normative commitment, the *doubt about the behaviour and leadership of the group* (Koehler 2017, 24-25) has the effect of corroding the affective commitment, and the *doubt related to personal or practical aspects* (Koehler 2017, 24-25) affects continuance commitment.

As already mentioned, knowledge of the factors that motivated the individual to leave the organization is necessary to find the best method of deradicalisation that fits his psychological and behavioural profile, given the trajectory and path of the individual from radicalisation to at the time of desertion.

3. Disengagement and Deradicalisation Programs

Disengagement and deradicalisation programs represent "any method, activity, or program designed to reduce individual or collective physical and ideological commitment to a group, milieu, or movement designated as 'extremist' or violently radical" (Koehler 2017, 29). In his paper, Horgan believes that these deradicalisation programs are understood as programs that reduce the risk of the individual re-engaging in actions that lead to the spread of terror. However, this perspective on deradicalisation programs refers to the rehabilitation and reintegration into society of those who have already taken part in the attacks, i.e. those who have been



engaged in criminal and illegal actions, first involving the arrest and imprisonment of the individual as a precondition for these programs (Koehler 2017, 29). Horgan does not take into account self-radicalisation, i.e. the cases in which the individual wants to radicalize voluntarily, without outside intervention.

The approach of these programs, which precondition the incarceration of the individual, can range from informal discussions between prisoners and imams (in Australia) and intensive weeks of religious education courses lasting several weeks (in Mauritania), to programs lasting several years (in Saudi Arabia) (Pettinger 2017, 7). The example of the program in Saudi Arabia is perhaps the most famous, assuming, in addition to the ideological component, “political education, vocational training, painting, physical education, and to facilitate the reintegration of individuals” (Pettinger 2017, 7), to which is added the attempt to find a wife once the individual is released. The Saudi program thus incorporates both the ideological component and a continuing disengagement through the reintegration of individuals into society, encouraging, among other things, the participation of former activists to encourage deradicalisation. Saudi officials estimated that the program has a re-engagement rate of 0%, but as expected, this figure did not reflect reality, thus the officials reaffirmed that the rate is 10-20%, although it is believed that it is, in fact, 30-40% (Pettinger 2017, 11-12). One problem that all deradicalisation programs face is the lack of a standard for measuring recidivism, which is an extremely subjective assessment. However, the Saudi program focuses on deradicalizing those individuals who have not been directly involved in violent attacks, which implies a low degree of radicalisation.

Another successful *deradicalisation program* is *The Disengagement and Deradicalisation Pilot Program*, created in 2009 by the Adana Police Department in Turkey, which wanted to disengage individuals, abandon radical ideologies and reintegrate them into society through counselling, finding a place to work, and the guarantee of certain benefits, such as health insurance, housing and education (Bastug and Evlek 2016, 35). This program was a model for the Turkish authorities, so other law enforcement agencies took the initiative. Bastug and Evlek developed a working model of this program, starting with the law enforcement attempt to inform the individual about the dangers to which he is exposed by adhering to a radical ideology, the individual’s response determining the next process. This model is a relevant example for our research and, although it is intended to be implemented by law enforcement, it can also be used in other disengagement and deradicalisation programs. The model can be seen in Figure no.1.

Push and pull factors are extremely important for establishing the right and appropriate methods that have an effect on each individual, especially for those who choose to leave the violent lifestyle voluntarily. To be effective, the tools used by deradicalisation programs must be based on both the reasons that led to

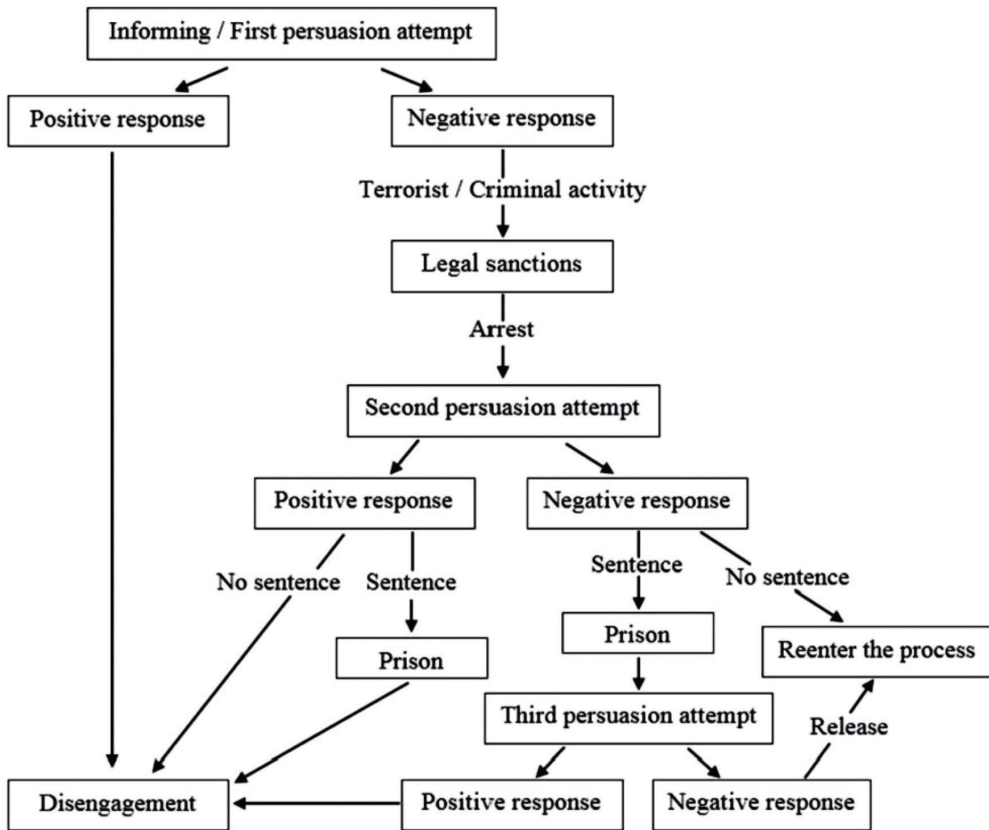


Figure no. 1: The stages of the disengagement process (Bastug and Evlek 2016, 37)

the radicalisation and the *push and pull* factors that led to the desire to disengage. Relevant to this are both Klandermans' model and the analogy made by Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen between *push and pull* factors and the types of commitment that an individual can have towards the extremist organization. An effective program must target all three types of commitment presented to minimize the chances of re-engagement.

Researchers who have studied the phenomenon of deradicalisation have taken elements from other disciplines, such as criminology, psychoanalysis, psychology, etc., so that the study of deradicalisation is a multidisciplinary one. Collaboration between several areas of research is essential for the creation of effective programs in the short, medium and long term, programs that can be evaluated in accordance with certain performance standards and that lead, in fact, to disengaging and deradicalizing extremists.

Greater integration of ethnic and religious groups into society in Western states could be a solution to prevent the radicalisation of these groups (Stern 2010, 1-4).



Initially, European governments viewed radicalisation as an issue of integration, a social issue, and refused to include a religious component in initiatives to combat violent extremism (CVE) (Rabasa et. all, 2010, 123). Thus, EU Council's attempt to revise the *Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism* in 2014 did not provide a religious component for the initiatives for combating radicalisation, even though they promoted the importance of disengagement and deradicalisation programs (Council of the European Union 2014). A 2015 European Parliament resolution also stated that "terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality or civilization" (European Parliament 2015) and that "(...) the misuse of religion, for negative purposes, and not religion itself, is one of the causes of radicalisation" (European Parliament 2015). There was no consensus at European level on CVE initiatives, nor were there any mechanisms to counteract the ideological component of radicalisation (Rabasa, et. all 2010, 122).

However, EU Member States have begun to pay more attention to the religious component of radicalisation, thus the *EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda 2020* states that Member States will be supported in sharing "experiences and good practices with regard to exchanges among religious and community leaders on the prevention of radicalisation" (European Commission 2020, 8). Also in 2016, the European Commission stated that "religion can play a vital role in preventing or countering radicalisation: it binds communities, strengthens the sense of belonging and guides people in a positive direction" (European Commission 2016, 4).

Programs of *disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Reinsertion, DDRR)* are not discussed enough in the literature, although their role is very important. The DDRR program is "a process that is introduced after a conflict and aimed mainly at ensuring the transition of combatants to civilian life" (Koehler 2017, 38-39). According to Koehler, there are three stages of a DDRR program: the first refers to the *collection and destruction of the weapons of the warring parties* (Koehler 2017, 39), in order to avoid the resume of armed conflict; the second phase aims to *demobilize the organizations and groups that participated in the conflict* (Koehler 2017, 39) (this had happened in the case of the FARC paramilitary group in Colombia, and the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the organization was ratified in 2016); the last stage refers to the *reintegration into society of ex-combatants* (Koehler 2017, 39) through various means, such as financial assistance, education and job insurance. This type of program is very effective in post-conflict reconstruction and has become the focus of UN and World Bank relief efforts and peacekeeping operations. DDRR programs are very important for the study of deradicalisation, especially because these initiatives encourage cooperation with members of the groups involved in the conflict, so the information gathered is extremely relevant. However, the information obtained did not necessarily form the



basis of the deradicalisation programs that were subsequently implemented, so there is a cognitive gap between them. At the same time, there are some shortcomings of a DDRR program, such as the lack of standards for measuring the level of reintegration of ex-combatants, although it has been observed that those with better education and economic support integrate much more easily (Koehler 2017, 41).

Deradicalisation, disengagement, reintegration and rehabilitation programs have been frequently used to obtain intelligence, being subordinated to military, police or secret services. Although the need to gather information is essential, the interactions of extremists with the authorities can lead to undesirable consequences, such as refusal to cooperate, the creation of psychological barriers and obstacles to reintegration into society (Koehler 2017, 95-96). However, these programs reduce the number of fighters who are members of terrorist organizations, help gather information that is very important to researchers and for the development of intelligence regarding the group and ideology. At the same time, the information gathered can be used, as Koehler points out, to create information campaigns and prevent radicalisation. The contribution of former extremists to these campaigns is also important, as their life stories can prevent radicalisation among potential followers of radical ideology (Koehler 2017, 104-106).

Daniel Koehler is the first researcher to provide a typology of *Deradicalisation and Disengagement Programs* (DDP), which identified seven types of these programs. These programs, grouped into typologies, must have several key elements: be targeted at individuals or groups who define themselves as radical, aim to achieve well-defined effects having the purpose of reintegrating target groups into society, and most importantly, the program must not use violence to obtain results (Koehler 2017, 112). A very interesting aspect of these programs is that they have tried to classify terrorism as a psychological disorder, but this has failed because there are not enough arguments to establish that violent radicalisation is a disease, on the contrary, it has been observed that terrorists are normal individuals (Koehler 2017, 114).

DDPs are a type of individual (micro-social) intervention that aims to reduce engagement or involvement in extremist groups. Koehler identifies three characteristics of these programs, such as: the *type of actor* (Koehler 2017, 116-117) who can start such a program, which can be initiated by both state authorities and NGOs, but a public-private partnership is seen as the most effective option (hybrid programs); *communication strategy* (Koehler 2017, 117-118) that it promotes, which can be active (trying to persuade individuals to take part in the program) or passive (the individual volunteering to take part in the program), noting that there is a higher rate of recidivism in the case of active DDPs because the individual does not have a cognitive openness or has a wrong motivation to join the program; *the relevance of the ideological component* (Koehler 2017, 118-119), so that only

programs that aim at an ideological change or a psychological disengagement can be classified as deradicalisation programs.

Thus, given the characteristics of such programs, the seven types of programs at the micro-social level are: type A (non-governmental, passive and includes the ideological component), type B (non-governmental, passive, without ideological component), type C (non-governmental, active, with or without ideological component), type D (governmental, active, and includes ideological component), type E (governmental, active, without ideological component), type F (governmental, passive, with or without ideology) and type G (public-private partnership, passive, with or without ideological component) (Koehler 2017, 119-135).

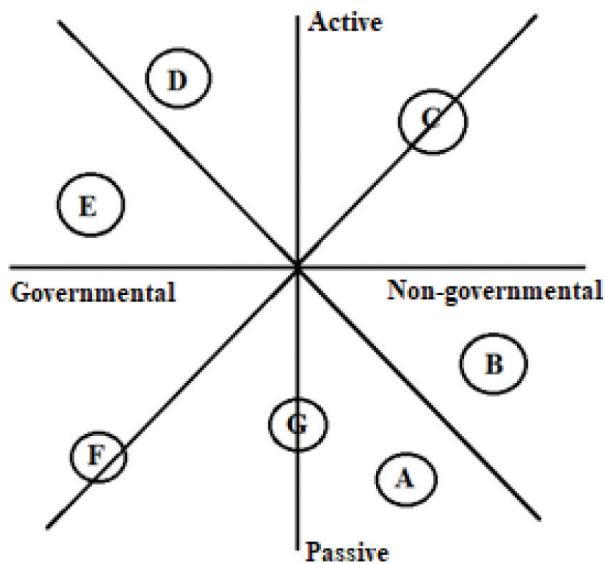


Figure no. 2: Typology of deradicalisation and disengagement programs
(Koehler 2017, 119)

As can be seen, there are many approaches to deradicalisation, thus we cannot talk about the existence of a universal method of deradicalisation. However, there is a consensus among experts about the role of family and friends in the deradicalisation process, as well as the role of psychological and family counselling. The importance of these aspects is given by the fact that, during the radicalisation process, the family's role is diminished, and the individual believes that his family will reject him and will not accept his new values and beliefs. Starting from this scenario, the experts from Hayat encourage families to behave in the opposite way, i.e. the family to be patient and open to dialogue. Hayat (Arabic for *Life*) is a counselling service that has been helping to eradicate young Muslims since 2011. This initiative is funded by the German government, and its effectiveness is given by the fact that experts



can be contacted by phone both by family and individual. Thus, the strategy of this initiative is to act on several levels, involving both the family and the individual, as well as imams, schools and, in some cases, authorities and law enforcement: “deradicalisation programs should not work around or above leaders of communities, organizations and families, but to include them, to work with them as equal partners and to share their fears, troubles and worries” (Boghani 2016).

Daniel Koehler, the initiator of this program, states that “the approach of the Hayat program is to involve the whole family, to bring together all those who have a positive relationship with the person in question” (Jansen 2014). Based on an Islamic argument (“The Prophet Muhammad clearly says that paradise is at your mother’s feet. (...) When you are a Muslim, you cannot avoid this: you must tell your parents and, above all, to your mother.”) (Jansen 2014), the program wants to replace extremist ideology with family values and the unity that exists within the family.

Hayat has become very popular among deradicalisation initiatives, receiving calls including from Austria, Canada, France and Sweden, and experts can offer their services in several languages, such as Arabic, English, Turkish, German and others. Moreover, it is desired to expand the program in the UK, Canada and Australia, and there may be a mutual exchange of information and skills between different states (Jansen 2014).

Koehler states that since 2012, Hayat experts have received more than 4,000 calls, which have resulted in more than 1,500 counselling cases (Boghani 2016). Koehler believes in the importance of the life stories of former extremists, working with them to facilitate deradicalisation. He also wants a balance between prison sentences and eradication programs, saying that “if you just increase the pressure in a container, but without creating a valve to release steam and provide a way out, it’s not good” (Boghani 2016).

Conclusions

In order to combat extremist ideologies and the threat of mass radicalisation, deradicalisation and disengagement centres have been set up all over the world. These are practical solutions and effective alternatives to incarcerating terrorists. These centres aim to combat extremist ideology, reduce the involvement of followers of this ideology in violent actions, and prevent such actions. An effective deradicalisation requires a personalized program for each individual, because the causes and reasons that lead to radicalisation, as well as the elements that can promote deradicalisation, are different for each individual. However, there are no centres exclusively for the deradicalisation of jihadists, and the spread of Islamist ideology with the return of former fighters to their home states poses a threat to state security.



Despite its importance, the deradicalisation process is poorly studied, and the lack of relevant information on deradicalisation centres is a significant obstacle to the understanding and practical applicability of this phenomenon. Another impediment is the impossibility of assessing the degree of deradicalisation of an individual, which has a subjective assessment.

In conclusion, further research on deradicalisation is needed, both to increase the effectiveness of the programs already implemented and to develop new such initiatives. Also, the gap between theory and practice must be eliminated, being necessary both the collaboration between specialists for the multidomain study of deradicalisation, as well as the implementation of new programs and the construction of several deradicalisation centres, activities that require a political consensus at international level.

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