

The De-Radicalisation or Disengagement Debate: An Experimental Survey Measuring Support for Returning Foreign Fighter Re-Integration Programmes

Introduction

Within terrorism studies there has been a debate concerning whether a de-radicalisation programmes' emphasis on ideological change matters for re-integrating violent extremists to ensure they do not reoffend or whether practitioners should focus on behavioural change encapsulated by terms such as disengagement and desistance. The term implies that by removing ones radical ideology, it provides a better quality of disengagement from violence by further reducing the risk of recidivism. However radical ideology has an extremely complex relationship with violence and some studies show de-radicalisation programmes may not be necessary to reduce the risk of recidivism. The term de-radicalisation programme has also been misused heavily, by media and the government, to often refer to programmes which do little or no ideological work. For that reason top terrorism scholars have recommended more neutral framings of these programmes such as desistance and disengagement programmes. Most research until now has focused on the internal workings of these programmes and little work has been done to look at the context in which these programmes attempt to re-integrate violent extremists. This research therefore expands the scope of the current academic debate to explore whether the emphasis on de-radicalisation by the government is more or less successful in generating public support for re-integration programmes than if programmes avoided the language and objectives of de-radicalisation.

Methods

We adopted an experimental survey methodology, a relatively new and exciting approach within social sciences which has proven to be the gold standard in identifying causal inference. It allows us to understand participants perceptions to the programme, without having to ask directly, meaning we are able to provide a baseline to measure how attitudes change toward a programme when the term or concept of de-radicalisation is included. We assumed that the inclusion of de-radicalisation, both as the name of the programme and within the context of a vignette, would change public attitudes towards re-integration programmes, but were unsure of the direction of the change due to such volatile media coverage in recent years. To address the hypothesis we deploy an experimental survey designed to test whether the inclusion of de-radicalisation (the treatment) over disengagement and desistance (the control) changes support for a re-integration programme. Subsequently, our null hypothesis for the t-test was: the inclusion of de-radicalisation in the name and content of the re-integration programme does not change attitudes to the re-integration programme.

Findings

Statistical analyses using Stata observed differences between the control group, which had no mention of de-radicalisation or de-radicalisation content, against three treatment groups, with varying degrees of de-radicalisation mentioned in relation to the re-integration programme. We discovered that the difference in attitudes to the re-integration programme is linked to the inclusion or exclusion of de-radicalisation, and not by chance. Therefore we can argue that the use of de-radicalisation in how a re-integration programme is framed does matter for public support and perceived effectiveness. We found that use of the term de-radicalisation in the programme's framing increased support for the programme, meaning it is possible that the more de-radicalisation is used explicitly, the more popular a programme will be. While framing a programme in terms of de-radicalisation may increase support for a programme, the effect of the term in regards to the programmes perceived effectiveness is inverse. Using the framing of de-radicalisation reduces perceived effectiveness of the programme. We measured this by asking if respondents thought the programme made the UK safer and whether it made returning fighters less likely to re-offend. This meant that respondents, while thinking more highly of a programme if it is labelled a de-radicalisation one, assume it will be less successful and is less likely to make the UK safer and reduce the chance of reoffending by violent extremists. Excluding reference to de-radicalisation and ideological intervention, is therefore likely to make a programme have less opposition, fewer people questioning its effectiveness, and while support will be relatively less than a de-radicalisation programme would generate, opinions wouldn't be as polarised.

Discussion

The UK government frames its own programme's objectives in terms of increasing safety but the fact that respondents felt the programme does not make the UK safer when the programme is framed as 'de-radicalisation' instead of 'disengagement and desistance', or when the objective of the programme is to facilitate de-radicalisation, provides a good indication of the respondents' perception of how effective the programmes are in achieving their fundamental objectives. The results show that there are consequences for labelling a programme as de-radicalisation or publicly including de-radicalisation objectives within a programme – perceived effectiveness declines *despite* entrenching support for the programme. This research has made some first steps to developing knowledge of how de-radicalisation shapes perceptions of re-integration programmes. The study was limited in the number of variables which could be discussed, yet a more expansive experimental survey would benefit by varying the actor initiating the programme (government agency; security services; NGO), the type of actor being targeted in an intervention (testing actors in the post and pre-criminal space; Islamist versus non-Islamist returning fighters; male and female returning fighters), the inclusion and exclusion of different professionals within a programme (e.g. the use of Imams, the use of former extremists), and the types of support upon re-integration (monitoring, support with jobs and skills etc).

Results

Experiment 1. Comparing aa with 11

Variable		Control	Name and Vignette change	t-value	prob
Support	M	3.51	3.77	-1.92	0.03*
Safer	M	3.45	3.16	2.25	0.01*
Reoffend	M	3.35	3.02	2.56	0.00**

Experiment 2. Comparing aa with 1a

Variable		Control	Name Changed Neutral vignette	t-value	prob
Support	M	3.48	3.62	-1.09	0.14
Safer	M	3.39	3.18	1.62	0.05*
Reoffend	M	3.35	2.93	3.00	0.00**

Experiment 3. Comparing aa with a1

Variable		Control	Neutral Name Vignette Changed	t-value	prob
Support	M	3.52	3.60	-0.5	0.31
Safer	M	3.46	3.17	2.19	0.02*
Reoffend	M	3.40	2.91	3.71	0.00**