

Monkey Cage

## Deradicalization revisited

By Omar Ashour February 18

The Obama administration is holding the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). It is another laudable attempt to try to understand violent activism, its supportive ideologies and other causes behind it. The statement from [Maj. Gen. Michael Nagata](#), commander of U.S. Special Operations forces in the Middle East, reflects the high stakes: “We do not understand the movement [Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it.”

With regard to the “deradicalization” element in CVE, I have some notes based on my research experience from the last 10 years. They include some good and some bad news for the conference conveners.

In March 2010, I attended a conference in the Libyan capital of Tripoli with academic colleagues, Western journalists and officials. It marked the release of the leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in a “reconciliation” process led by Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, the heir apparent of Moammar Gaddafi. “Deradicalization” was a major component of the process. The LIFG did not just abandon armed activism against the Gaddafi regime, but also produced 416 pages of thorough theological, ideological, instrumental and socio-psychological argumentations de-legitimizing various forms of non-state armed activism – including terrorism tactics. Back then, the [document](#) served, and was celebrated, as a counter-narrative to the rhetoric and ideas of violent extremist groups, particularly al-Qaeda.

In August 2011, in the middle of an armed revolution, one of the LIFG [leaders](#) spearheaded an attack on the Bab al-Aziziya compound, Moammar Gaddafi’s headquarters. Between February and August 2011, the political environment had no room for deradicalization and reconciliation. Institutionalized mechanisms of non-violent conflict resolution had not been introduced in Libya. Security sector reform processes, revisions of standard operating procedures (SOPs) in times of political crises and a credible transitional justice process were unheard of. Overall, a sustained transformation from armed to unarmed activism had little-to-no chance, despite the investments in it.

This hasn’t been just a Libyan story. Officers, soldiers and employees of Task Force 134 – the unit commanding all detention operations in Iraq, including Camp Bucca the former home of Abu Baker al-Baghdadi – understand this well. A rehabilitation program with a deradicalization component was introduced by the United States in Iraqi prisons in 2007. It had some initial positive [effects](#), and by 2008, about 10,000 prisoners were freed while the country was in a process of de-escalation. But by 2010 most of the effects dissipated.

This is not to say that every deradicalization process and program is bound to failure. The concept is important, and deradicalization has a critical impact on national reconciliation, social cohesion, the functioning of state institutions, human security and human rights.

But what exactly is deradicalization? And when and why does it fail or succeed?

*Deradicalization* refers to a process of relative change, one in which a radical group reverses its ideology and de-legitimizes the use of violent methods to achieve political goals, while also moving toward an acceptance of gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context. But scholars have never agreed on one precise definition and the security community has debated on the definition.

On the one end, some experts [argue](#) that the concept should be centered on changing attitudes toward political violence and the pace of socio-political change, rather than toward constitutional liberalism. This means that deradicalized groups will reject violence and accept slow and gradual institutional reform, but may still uphold misogynist, homophobic, xenophobic and other illiberal views.

Others believe that deradicalized groups and individuals must uphold constitutional liberalism. This sets the standard of deradicalization at a higher level, at which, in a Middle Eastern context, many political parties, social movements and particularly armed groups may fail.

There are political costs and policy implications for upholding either of the definitions. The first definition may risk undermining social cohesion, especially in multicultural societies. The second is generally used to dismiss mere transitions from armed to unarmed activism as deradicalization “failures” and therefore politically and legally exclude particular political groups on the basis that they did not become liberal democratic entities. In previous works based on a Middle Eastern [context](#), I found it useful to distinguish between *deradicalization* and *moderation*. The latter is also a process of relative change that is mainly concerned with attitudes toward liberal democracy. Still, as Jillian Schwedler mentioned in a recent [article](#), there is also no scholarly consensus on the [definition](#) of moderation.

Within authoritarian systems, deradicalization is sometimes conflated with political co-optation. Only groups that toe the regime line and show loyalty to the leader – whether a president or a king – are considered “de-radicalized” or “moderates.” If a group transforms its means for change – from armed to unarmed – but remains in opposition, it is still “radical” or “extreme.”

Transformation from armed to unarmed activism is not a unique phenomenon in the Middle East. A statistical [study](#) conducted by the RAND Corp. showed that among 268 identified “terrorist groups” that operated between 1968 and 2006 only 20 (7 percent) were defeated militarily. By contrast, 114 (43 percent) joined the political mainstream, either as political parties or socio-political movements. Policing, intelligence and public backlash were

responsible for dismantling 107 (40 percent) of organizations, the majority of them small ones. For bigger groups (especially those above 1,000 members), by far the most common trajectory was a conversion to unarmed politics.

So, how does such transformation happen? Deradicalization can occur on three dimensions: ideological, behavioral and organizational. And usually a combination of charismatic leadership within the organization, state or regime repression, interactions with the non-like-minded “other” as well as between the layers of the organization, and selective inducements from the state and other actors within a de-escalatory environment are common causes of deradicalization. There is a pattern of interaction between these factors. State repression and interaction with non like-minded actors often affect the ideas and the behavior of the leadership of an armed radical organization and are likely to lead those leaders to initiate three endogenous processes: strategic calculations based on cost-benefit analysis, political learning based on interaction with the non-like-minded and modification of the group’s worldview as a result of severe crises, frustration and dramatic changes in the environment. Following these processes, the leadership of an armed organization initiates a de-radicalization process that is bolstered by selective inducements from the state as well as by internal interactions. Also, deradicalized groups often interact with armed groups and sometimes influence them in a controlled, pressured environment (such as prisons, areas of exile or rugged strongholds).

Deradicalization processes and programs have been used as an integral part of counter-terrorism and security strategies in a number of Arab-majority countries. For example, Morocco, [Saudi Arabia](#), Iraq, Jordan and Yemen employed structured prison programs under the control of the state in which interactions between suspects and religious and spiritual leaders, civil society members and independent academics were introduced. Selective inducements were also employed under state control to support the deradicalization of selected individuals. Pre-2011 [Egypt](#), [Algeria](#) and Libya witnessed large-scale, collective deradicalization processes that combined ideological de-legitimization of political violence with processes of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration. The rates of success of these programs and processes were highly contested though, mainly due to macro-level, structural challenges and inhospitable environments. So far there is no consensus on how to measure success, although it is easier to measure collective transformations (organizations and factions) than individual ones. Additionally, the sustainability of these programs or processes – without a thorough process of political and security reform and transitional justice – is questionable.

Regardless of the approach taken to explain deradicalization processes, a consensus among scholars has developed that the process is extremely context-sensitive. In other words, in a political context in which authoritarian repression, military coups, civil wars and other forms of political violence and social instability are common features, sustained violent radicalization will be the likely outcome. And attempted deradicalization processes and programs are more likely to have limited, short-term effects or collapse.

The Arab-majority uprisings have given scholars and practitioners several important lessons about how changes within the political environment can affect radicalization and deradicalization.

The success of mainly unarmed civil resistance tactics in bringing down two authoritarian regimes in Tunisia (2010, 2011) and Egypt (2011) has briefly undermined the rationale of violent radicals; that armed action is most effective (and, in some sub-ideologies, the most legitimate) means for social and political change. However, the transformation of the nature of the uprisings in Libya and Syria in 2011 and onward, and the regional developments in Iraq (during and after April 2013) and in Egypt (during and after July 2013) have led to different conclusions: Soft power and civil resistance tactics have their limits and to pursue real change, hard power is necessary. These conclusions made by many youth activists have been capitalized upon by groups such as the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front and other like-minded organizations. In such an environment, radicalization, recruitment and ideological frames supportive of armed militancy are more likely to grow, survive and expand.

In the context of partly democratic institutionalized transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen between 2011 and 2013, a few critical policy-relevant observations can be deduced.

First, almost all of the deradicalized, once-armed large groups upheld their transformation from armed to unarmed activism. Organizations such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG) and the LIFG, and factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organization, have not only turned into political parties, but also participated in elections, constitutional crafting and mainstream political compromises. In 2011, the IG for example held internal elections, asked its members to fill out party registration forms, held anti-sectarian violence rallies and issued joint statements for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic Church of Assyut. However, the stance on constitutional liberalism did not change much. For example, the IG still denied the right of specific minorities and women to run for presidency. And in general, ultraconservative ideologies, such as Salafism or Wahhabism, partly shape the worldview of the organization.

A third observation is related to security sector reform (SSR). From previous research, it was clear to me that transitions from armed to unarmed activities are less likely to be sustained unless there is a thorough process of reforming the [security sector](#). The reform process should entail changing the SOPs, training and education curricula, leadership and promotion criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions. The violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been a major contributor to sparking and sustaining armed radicalization. This goes way back, since Sayyid Qutb significantly altered his ideology after witnessing a massacre in former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's prisons in 1957. Jihadism and takfirism were both born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s where torture ranged from a systematic daily practice in some periods to a selective-but-widespread practice in others; not that different from [today's](#) Egypt. Ultraconservative and extremist ideologies such as Salafism and Wahabbism were born and developed as well under authoritarian systems. None of the aforementioned ideologies have come out of a consolidated or a mature democracy.

A fourth observation has to do with reconfiguring civil-military relations. The supremacy of the armed over the elected and the judicial has created a political context in which bullets are more significant than ballots and laws as

a method for attaining and remaining in political power. Such a context in which political violence is legitimated in various forms and consistently proves effective is less likely to lead to deradicalization in any form.

A fifth observation is about demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR). The politicization of such a process and its failure in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and Yemeni uprising have led to the rise of multiple armed non-state actors, a phenomena that facilitated the necessary resources and logistics to armed radicals. DDR is inherently connected to SSR. Most armed, non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if there is no mutual trust or guarantees with the official armed institutions and armed state actors. This is especially the case when the latter has been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. This is among the reasons for de-escalation failures in places like Derna in eastern Libya, Sinai in northeastern Egypt, central and northern parts of Iraq, and southern and southeastern parts of Yemen, where armed actors representing the authorities are deeply mistrusted due to historical violations and impunities.

Finally, popular support for national reconciliation, compromise, inclusion and general de-escalation is crucial for undermining violent extremism and supporting deradicalization processes. That kind of support is partly a result of political culture that can be created and promoted via elementary, secondary and higher education, as well as a result of a responsible free media that promotes such concepts, as opposed to a hysteric media that promotes social and sectarian polarization.

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