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Deradicalising Returning Foreign Fighters: Lessons from Denmark

By Ahmad Saiful Rijal Hassan

Synopsis

In addition to the current threat of extremists and radicalised individuals, returning fighters are posing new challenges to state. Danish authorities have pioneered de-radicalisation programmes that focused on providing terrorists as well as former fighters the opportunity to reintegrate with mainstream society.

Commentary

DANISH AUTHORITIES have estimated that 145 of Denmark's citizens have left for Syria/Iraq since 2012. At least half of them have returned to Denmark and nearly a quarter remains in the conflict zone. Another quarter is assumed dead. Danish fighters account for the second highest number of fighters per capita in Europe according to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) report in 2015.

The deradicalisation programmes initiated by Danish authorities have gained much attention worldwide because of its soft approach to returning fighters from Syria/Iraq as well as other extremists and radicalised individuals. It is based on holistic, collaborative efforts between various agencies. They include social-service providers, the education sector, health-care agencies, the police, and the intelligence and security services.

Finetuned Through Trial and Error

This collaborative effort stems from years of experience and benefits from other structures and processes designed to confront common criminal activity. These programmes have been developed in practice through trial and error by various local agency practitioners comprising schools, youth clubs and social services.

The state plays a role in providing guidelines and receives feedback from the practitioners before being implemented fully. Currently, de-radicalisation processes, in ways that echo more contemporary peace and conflict resolution measures, are continuously being developed from top-down and bottom-up consultations to suit the challenges faced.

Two Types of Programmes

The Danish government has implemented two types of de-radicalisation programmes. The first called "*Deradicalisation - Targeted Intervention*" aims at helping individuals leave extremist environments and/or prevent them from getting involved in extremist environments.

It is achieved through developing tools that provide the youth with social support and advice to distance themselves from extremist circles. This programme comprises two approaches – Mentor support and Exit talks.

The Mentor support approach is the development of methods for individual mentorship for individuals who are showing signs of radicalisation. Mentors and resource personnel provide advice, guidance, counselling and social support that is needed for radicalised individuals to stay out of extremist circles.

The Exit talks approach is the concept of preventive talks targeted at individuals who are assessed to be in the process of radicalisation and who accept violence as a legitimate means to achieve personal and political goals. Counsellors are assigned to foster an understanding of the consequences of an extremist and criminal way of life; at the same time, they offer legitimate alternatives to the infatuation experienced by people joining extremist circles for the first time.

Back on Track

The second programme called "*De-radicalisation – Back on Track*" aims at helping prison inmates who have been convicted of terrorism or charged with criminal activities involving hate crimes by providing the necessary support needed to get "back on track". It also serves as a tool to support them in leaving far-right, far-left or religious extremism behind and their efforts to reintegrate into mainstream society upon their release.

The approach is established within the framework of an existing mentoring programme targeted at terrorist inmates who are placed in special units where they cannot exert their influence over other inmates. Mentors will then be assigned to their designated inmates and assessment made to facilitate the mentorship process better.

The local network of social service, healthcare providers and schools also participates in the rehabilitation process. It is a requirement for the detainees to participate in all aspects of the rehabilitation programme to be released on parole.

Guiding Principles

The Danish experience comprises three main guiding principles. The first is the principle of *inclusion* rather than exclusion or stigmatisation. This principle of inclusion denotes meaningful participation in common cultural, social, and societal life. It means that the Danish government recognises these individuals are no different from the rest of Danish citizens who can get an education and a job, provided detainees put violence by the wayside in efforts to achieve their goals.

The idea of inclusion is embedded in the concept of modern democracy and pluralism in Denmark which is built by legal participation of many different communities in finding the best possible solutions to emerging challenges. It is, therefore, the aim of the programme to transform the personal, social, cultural, and political motivations into legal modes of participation and citizenship.

The second principle is the importance of *quality relationships* between different private sector bodies and institutions working with various government agencies in the implementation process. At the national level, the focus is on building capacity and supporting these local initiatives by offering skill enhancement activities, developing concrete methods in combating extremism and radicalisation, and counselling workshops.

Scientific Discipline

The third principle is that the programme is based on a scientific discipline called *Life Psychology*. Developed by the Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at the Aarhus University, it provides a theoretical grounding in the understanding of radicalisation processes, risk factors, and resilience.

The basis of Life Psychology lies primarily in the presumption that every individual aspires for a “good life”. And to achieve that, one must overcome various obstacles, challenges and setbacks to achieve his or her aspiration. The second presumption is that to have a “good life”, the person must possess sufficient skills to enable him or her to cope with life tasks.

These tasks involve daily activities that fall into the realm of social, work or leisure domains and emphasise the process of making important decisions. The third presumption lies in the fact that every individual regardless of gender, life history and religious, social and cultural background, encounters the same fundamental life tasks.

Challenges

The use of existing structures to counter extremism and radicalisation has proven to be valuable, and the model itself boasts sufficient capacity and resources. Its effectiveness, however, remains difficult to measure.

There are challenges in the implementation of the de-radicalisation programme in Denmark. Some experts are of the opinion that there should be a greater focus on punitive measures and they contest whether the soft approach is effective. Another challenge is the question of to what extent the government should be allowed to intervene in the lives of citizens in a welfare state; this remains unanswered.

Although the challenges faced may not be completely addressed by the authorities in a short period, the experiences of various stakeholders in Denmark dealing with de-radicalisation show that the challenges can be dealt with. In the broader sense, the stakeholders managed to perform a huge task with minimum resources available through intensive cooperation with each other.

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