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Meeting Summary

The De-radicalisation of Jihadists

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Chair: Dr Claire Spencer

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Introduction

Dr Claire Spencer introduced the speakers and their current work on the topic, before introducing the concept that the phenomenon of de-radicalisation was not a 'cul-de-sac', but rather a developing and shifting process.

The characteristics of de-radicalisation

Dr Omar Ashour then began by outlining that de-radicalization is a process that has been witnessed across more than twenty countries, but each with different approaches from key players, and each with different results. Several factors have a role in de-radicalisation, as do different societal actors. For example, de-radicalisation can come about organically as a result of pressure from a governing regime (through actions such as imprisonment or repression), or equally because of a decision taken by the leadership of a jihadist organisation itself (perhaps because of a failure to win hearts and minds, or to obtain adequate funding). Additionally, de-radicalisation as a process consciously implemented by a government can take different forms.

In this respect, Dr Ashour discussed the example of Saudi Arabia's de-radicalisation programme in particular. This has widely been considered a success, with 3,000 'graduates' and a 98% success rate claimed by the government. It is a threefold process: 'crack', prevention, and after care. It is a comprehensive programme with not just economic incentives aimed at participants and their families, but it also addresses psychological issues. Dr Ashour added that families are very much involved and asked to help. The programme can be considered successful because it speaks a language detainees can be influenced by, that is, one based within the Saudi context. Thus, attempts to use a similar method elsewhere, for example in Malaysia, have not translated successfully.

Above all, however, Dr Ashour emphasised that the interaction between the leadership of an organisation and its grassroots was significant in determining the processes of radicalisation/de-radicalisation. Moreover, changes and updates in world view were crucial.

Dr Spencer commented how opportunistic the process of de-radicalisation was if it was based upon a change in perspective.

The future of de-radicalisation processes

Dr Maha Azzam turned to the issue of the direction that the process might take in the future, and whether de-radicalisation would be ongoing. It was a topic that would raise questions about confronting education about political Islam, as well as domestic and international challenges. Dr Azzam wanted to draw attention to the fact that failure was a key factor, and emphasised that if a jihadist group manages to win hearts and minds or to obtain financing, shifts in ideology could not be assumed.

She added that the issue of violence in Islam has been debated for a long time, but that the sources relied upon in discussions has changed. She argued that de-radicalisation has given momentum to this shift and suggested that in the future it would be necessary to discuss the impact of new authorities or new literature.

Dr Azzam continued by suggesting that the challenges presented by radical groups in the West were different from those faced by governments in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Yemen, where the traditional 'ulema has more influence. She also discussed the implication of de-radicalisation on jihadist groups elsewhere in the world, adding that this may cause the breakdown of channels for causes such as Afghanistan and Yemen, but it would not dampen fervour. In many minds, she added, a differentiation was made between killing civilians and resisting foreign occupation, the latter gaining more sympathy.

She concluded by posing the idea that the current period of de-radicalisation may not necessarily only be the beginning of a longer process of de-radicalisation, but also the start of many political strands coming together against incumbent regimes. Thus, the battle to open up the political process is still to come.

The topic was then opened to questions from the room. Omar al-Ghazi of BBC Monitoring wondered what the repercussions of de-radicalisation might be upon society, questioning whether society might become radicalised in the process. Dr Ashour answered this by providing two contrasting examples: Algerian society has shown that it is keen for reconciliation, whilst Egypt has shown reintegration of former jihadists can be difficult because society is unwilling to provide jobs, etc. He added that de-radicalisation was not about removing radicalisation completely, and was a short-term rather than a long-term solution for society. Dr Azzam repeated her earlier observation that societies may already espouse radical Islam, just not political violence.

Neil Partrick then asked how much the process of de-radicalisation needed political will or economic underpinning. Dr Azzam commented that many governments lack political will. Khalid al-Mubarak, Media Counsellor with the Sudanese Embassy, outlined that the issue of de-radicalisation needed to be placed within the wider context to be a sustainable process. That is, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict needed to be addressed; Muslims needed to be shown the bright side of democracy and not incidents such as Abu Ghraib; and there needed to be support for real modernisation in the Middle East and not just reliance upon autocratic regimes. Dr Azzam agreed, adding that there needs to be pressure for democratisation, whether from the inside or outside. She stated that accountability is very important: electorates have moved on from just wanting MPs in a parliament; they expect accountability. De-radicalisation was not just about Islamism: she commented that the website of the Muslim Brotherhood shows how far they have come, and the level of support is such that if there were free and fair elections they would stand a good chance of being successful.

Concluding remarks

Dr Ashour concluded that the root of the problem lies in democratisation. Dr Spencer then summarised that, therefore the issue of de-radicalisation was a subject in transition.