

# Reintegrating extremist into society

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The UK government's increasingly punitive response to those involved in terrorism risks undermining efforts to successfully reintegrate former extremists, according to research by the University of St Andrews.

The researcher behind the report - published online this month – says current policy proposals may hamper efforts to protect the public from future [terrorist attacks](#).

Report author, Dr Sarah Marsden, suggests that former terrorists – willing to renounce extremism - face significant barriers reintegrating into society. In response, Dr Marsden suggests that more individualised approaches could yield more successful, long-term results than increasing sentences or banning returning 'foreign fighters' from entering the country.

The new study challenges prevailing assumptions that personal ideology and beliefs are the most important features of terrorist offending, and highlights additional shortcomings in current thinking about how the West deals with those suspected and convicted of involvement in terrorism.

Dr Marsden, a Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews, said,

"Ignoring the interconnected aspects of someone's life, their interpersonal relations and their interaction with wider society overlooks

the complex interplay of internal and external influences on extremist behaviour."

Existing approaches to 'deradicalisation' tend to look for specific indicators of risk, such as someone having an attachment to an ideology justifying violence or accessing extremist material. However, this generally fails to consider the bigger picture, or take the holistic, individualised approach necessary to support reintegration, the researcher warns.

"Focusing heavily on deradicalisation ignores, or at best underplays, the context into which someone is being reintegrated. As well as a willingness by the former terrorist to renounce extremism, society has to be willing to allow them to reintegrate on a personally meaningful level."

Faced by increasing terrorist activities and attacks, the rehabilitation of extremists has fallen in and out of favour since it was first identified as a world-changing idea in 2008. With concern mounting regarding returnees from Syria and Iraq, plus the increasing number of people being released from prison following terrorism convictions, the need for establishing effective methods to reintegrate extremists into society is acute and growing.

At the end of their prison terms, people convicted of terrorism offences are generally released back into society under the supervision of probation services. Recent UK proposals to deal with the threat of returning extremists include forced attendance at deradicalisation programmes, strengthening Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) and banning UK citizens from leaving the country or returning if they are suspected of involvement in terrorism.

Dr Marsden's research points to the benefits of a less punitive approach. "While work with people convicted of terrorism offences is in its

infancy in this country and further afield," she continued, "efforts are being made to encourage disengagement from terrorism and instigate effective deradicalisation initiatives. Denmark has developed a particularly innovative approach, delivering social support to people returning from Syria to facilitate their reintegration back into society, which may prove to be a more promising alternative."

While Dr Marsden recognises it is difficult to address issues of reintegration in the wake of recent terrorist attacks, extremists convicted of training and facilitating [terrorism](#) will spend less time in prison than those convicted of more serious offences, and with their release will return to society.

"As with all offenders, it is the responsibility of the criminal justice system to not only punish and deter extremists, but also to rehabilitate," she commented.

The research suggests that an individualised approach to reintegration, which is sensitive to the impact of the wider social and political context, offers an alternative way of securing long-term desistance from extremism, while reducing the risk of further terrorist attacks.

In addition to researching the long-term outcomes of violence in the Middle East, Dr Marsden has carried out extensive research on individual processes of disengagement and desistance from militancy in the UK. Her latest paper echoes the difficulties faced by the majority of ex-offenders, such as finding employment, and reveals the unique challenges which former extremists face upon their release.

Dr Marsden concluded, "The increasingly vitriolic debate about Islamists not only puts up barriers to achieving positive relations between sections of our society, it also reduces the space where former extremists might be able to reintegrate and limits opportunities to challenge individual

belief that violence is necessary to bring about political change."

**More information:** "Conceptualising 'success' with those convicted of terrorism offences: Aims, methods, and barriers to reintegration." [DOI: 10.1080/19434472.2014.1001421](https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2014.1001421)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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