

CEP Conference 26-27 November 2015

Speech by Mark Singleton on “Radicalisation and Probation”

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to attend and address this impressive gathering of probation experts, on the topic of radicalisation and probation.

My name is Mark Singleton and I lead a team of academics, policy analysts and practitioners at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). Established in 2010, we are an independent think and do tank, connecting academics, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields. We provide a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise. Our work covers four interrelated areas:

1. We conduct **policy-relevant and evidence-based research** aimed to provide practical and solutions-oriented policy recommendations. Research areas include comparative analysis of counter-terrorism policies, strategies and interventions, country and regional analyses, the foreign fighter phenomenon and forward looking trends and threats analyses.
2. **Policy advice**: translating our analysis findings into practical, solutions-oriented policy recommendations that support policymakers and practitioners in their daily work;
3. **Support the design and implementation** of comprehensive and more systemic global, regional and national counter-terrorism **strategies and activities**;
4. **Systematic evaluation** of past and current counter-terrorism policies and strategies to assess effectiveness, learn from experiences and improve practices. Policies and strategies are often based on untested
5. assumptions, thus running the risk of improper decision-making, which in turn might trigger unwanted and unforeseen dynamics.

We work closely with governments, civil society, multilateral agencies (UN, EU, NATO, OSCE) and other research centres, and participate in fora such as the EU’s Radicalisation Awareness Network and the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (for which we have become its global secretariat).

Today's topic – radicalisation and probation – is an important area of our work; ICCT has carried out research, provided policy advice, development of risk assessment tools, as well as training and capacity building programmes for CJ responders on precisely these topics.

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We are witnessing an unprecedented rise in global terrorism. According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, terrorist activity increased by 80% in 2014. And although terrorist activity is highly concentrated - 5 countries account for almost 80% of all deaths – more countries are now affected than ever before. And with the foreign fighter phenomenon having gone global, with over a 100 countries involved, terrorism has finally “come home”. It's now seen as one of the most serious threats to global peace and security.

The Paris attacks were not the work of a distant enemy. They were committed by 9 Europeans, 6 of whom had gone to Syria. They had radicalised in their own neighbourhoods and learned the tools of the trade in Syria.

What do we mean by radicalisation?

Like terrorism, radicalisation is a disputed topic among experts. Terrorism expert Peter Neumann once described radicalisation as ‘what goes on before the bomb goes off’. But that would appear to be too simple. Two key characteristics of radicalization are:

1. Advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical;
2. The means advocated to bring about the system-transforming radical solution for government and society can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution).

Radicals then are not *per se* violent and while they might share certain characteristics with (violent) extremists, there are also important differences (such as regarding the willingness to engage in critical thinking). It does not follow that a radical attitude must result in violent behaviour; in fact, radical thinking has often been a force for good. Mahatma Gandhi was a radical, according to the British. Nelson Mandela was even branded a terrorist. What matters – from a societal point of view - is whether radical ideas and positions lead to criminal behaviour, such as incitement and violence. Radicalisation may be a challenge, but we mustn't equate it with violence and terrorism.

The two elements of radicalisation experts actually do agree on is that **every radicalized person is different, and that radicalisation is a process**. This process is influenced by a wide range of factors. These factors can be broadly divided into three levels:

Starting with the **micro level**: relating to the individual. Here we're talking about psycho-psychological aspects and past events including identity problems, feelings of humiliation and revenge, perceived discrimination and relative deprivation, to name a few.

In between is the **meso level**: the immediate surroundings, friends, family, community and potentially radical milieu which might influence an individual and connect them to a broader radical if not violent movement.

Then there is the **macro level** – factors such as the role of governments at home and abroad, geo-political developments but also developments of party politics and sentiments in society at large as well as socio-economic opportunities for sections of society.

On all levels there is a complex set of internal and external **push and pull factors that motivate some people**. The list is long and varies from community to community and from person to person. Context matters. And not surprisingly, the more granular your analysis, the less straightforward things become. To illustrate this: since 2001, the University of Maryland has researched all terrorism cases in the US and has identified between 150 and 200 distinct motivational factors.

So **understanding radicalisation is challenging**. But it actually goes a lot deeper: how we define radicalisation, affects both our level of understanding, and our strategy to address it. The term “radical” isn't neutral; on the contrary. It is inherently political. Language matters, and reflects deeper-lying assumptions and values. Many of these assumptions are unspoken and go untested, especially in the heat of the moment, when pressure to act decisively runs high.

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How best to address radicalisation?

Addressing radicalisation is often divided into “front-end” and “back-end” measures. Front-end measures are usually those that focus on detection, deterrence and prosecution, but also preventative measures that range from addressing online propaganda to community engagement and early warning. I will not address these here. Instead, let's concentrate on the “back end of the radicalisation process”: imprisonment and probation upon release. Your role is to ensure that former prisoners are rehabilitated and reintegrated into society in a peaceful and sustainable manner.

Radicalisation leading to violent extremism is not a new phenomenon for prison and probation, but the current scale of the problem, together with the growing numbers of extremist offenders (especially foreign fighters) calls for reflection on existing perspectives, measures and interventions. As the number of returning foreign fighters increases, and the legal net is cast wider to enable the prosecution of these foreign fighters, more and more individuals are likely to become the subject of criminal investigations.

To date, Member States have dealt with the problem from the criminal justice angle mainly by criminalising terrorist acts and then prosecuting and detaining (aspiring) foreign fighters. More prosecutions for terrorist offences will inevitably mean more prison sentences. Prisons are often referred to as breeding grounds for radicalisation, an environment in which offenders — especially juveniles and those convicted for minor crimes — may be particularly vulnerable to indoctrination and recruitment by extremist groups. The current overcrowding in many EU prisons is exacerbating the problem and a lack of financial and human resources often means that prisoners are not monitored sufficiently (so crucial opportunities to detect violent extremism may be missed) and hampers the development of programmes whereby prison chaplains/imams and counsellors can provide guidance and support.

Calls to integrate rehabilitation and reintegration as part of the overall response to the foreign fighter phenomenon have become louder. These include United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), which calls for “developing and implementing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters”. In Europe, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) Gilles de Kerchove recommended in early 2015 to explore rehabilitation and reintegration programmes as *alternatives* to bringing individuals to court; and the European Union (EU) Ministers of Justice placed rehabilitation high on the list of priorities. The latest Conclusions of the Council of the European Union and of the Member States on enhancing the criminal justice response to radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism, of November 20th, underscore the need for a more systemic, integrated approach. I will come to these later on.

Recognition is one thing; developing and implementing effective approaches is another. It’s actually very challenging. So what are the key challenges? Well, there are many. Besides a need for awareness and training among prison and probation staff; eradicating prejudices around religion; the everlasting problem of coordination, and the balance between security now, and upon release, I believe there are three that really stand out.

1. Perhaps the biggest challenge in reintegrating violent extremists is that **little evidence exists concerning what does and does not work**. No tried and tested theory describing what needs to be done to ensure de-radicalization or successful re-entry into society currently exists, and only very few programmes have been evaluated (or have been running long enough to generate statistically significant outcomes). One size does not fit all: what works in one country may not work in another and each offender may require a unique approach or service. There is, as such, no straightforward guideline for policymakers when setting up and implementing reintegration efforts for violent extremist offenders. Fortunately, the body of relevant research and expertise is growing and a number of reports, articles, and conference proceedings highlighting good practices and lessons learned have been published. While still in a nascent state, the current body of knowledge provides ample direction for policymakers and prison authorities, identifying key questions and issues that must be dealt with when developing a programme that fits their own unique situation. We will come to these later on.
2. A second challenge policy-makers face is **whether violent extremist offenders should be detained in separate prison units or integrated into the mainstream inmate population**. Many Member States are examining how their prisons should be organised so as to prevent the spread of radical ideas that may attract followers and lead to violent extremism. Tests have been conducted, pre-trial and post-trial, to determine whether (potential) terrorist prisoners should be kept together or allowed to mix with the rest of the prison population. Mixing can lead to contacts being made with other criminal networks or to vulnerable prisoners being indoctrinated. Isolation can reinforce extremist views, have a stigmatising effect leading to frustration and anger among inmates and their communities, and make post-release reintegration less likely. Also, those who are stripped of rights in a high security environment may acquire hero or martyr status, particularly in the case of pre-trial detainees who are to be presumed innocent.

There is no universally accepted good practice in this regard, although it is generally suggested that specialized measures should be informed by personal risk assessments and implemented on an individual basis. In her 2015 evaluation of prison policy responses to extremism, especially the policy of concentration, ICCT Fellow Dr. Tinka Veldhuis concludes that concentrating convicted extremists/terrorists in the same unit may well reflect a panicked response to a perceived threat, rather than a sound and rational decision, and that there is little to no evidence that such policies are an adequate way to detain terrorism offenders and prevent prisoner radicalisation. In fact, evidence suggests that such policies may produce undesired outcomes that could ultimately lead to heightened rather than reduced violent extremist threat.

Of course, prisons can also play a positive role in tackling radicalisation and terrorism and have served as incubators for peaceful change, including processes leading to reconciliation with victims. If supported properly, the special circumstances of detention and isolation from the outside world can allow for self-reflection and openness to change, and inmates may be more disposed to participate in rehabilitation programmes. Such programmes are crucial if efficient use is to be made of the time served in detention and prisoners are to be reintegrated into society on their release.

In sum: There is no easy answer. Each case has to be looked at separately; what may work for one may be ineffective and even counterproductive for the other. This brings me to the third challenge:

3. **Risk assessments.** Many Member States are seeking ways of distinguishing between the various levels of threat violent extremists may pose. Extremists, and returning Foreign Fighters especially, are a heterogeneous category – individuals may be dangerous, traumatised, in need of mental support, or disillusioned and ready for reintegration.

Because radicalisation is a **mind-set** and not a crime by law, it is difficult to determine the 'radicalised offender' profile. In fact, profiling of potential “victims of radicalisation” or “perpetrators of violent extremism” as a way of assessing risk, is virtually impossible – and, I would caution, even dangerous, because of its polarising effect and the likelihood of ignoring vital information. Failure to identify those who might, with assistance, be able to return to a 'normal life' could lead to their further radicalisation. There is therefore a real need for efficient risk assessment tools to help judges and prosecutors to decide on a sentence and prison authorities to determine detention arrangements. It is unclear whether the same tools can be used for violent extremism as for other serious crimes, or whether something more specific is needed. What is evident is that successful risk assessment will depend on close cooperation between intelligence services, the police, judicial authorities, probation officers, social workers, religious scholars, communities and schools. It is also essential that professionals are properly trained in carrying out risk assessments.

This brings me to recommendations and proposed remedies

The RAN and GCTF have developed valuable reference documents with highly relevant policy recommendations. The RAN practitioners working paper “dealing with Radicalisation in a prison and probation context” addresses the various phases in the criminal justice response

chain: (i) identification and risk assessment – pre- and post trial; (ii) during the sentence; and (iii) life after release from prison.

The GCTF recommendations were brought together in the “Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Rehabilitation of Violent Extremist Offenders”. The document consists of 25 “*Good Practices*” for planning; risk assessment; housing of inmates; staff training; stakeholder engagement; components of reintegration efforts; and capacity building.

Many of these recommendations have now been incorporated into EU policy. Building on the presentations and outcomes of the ministerial-level conference on 19 October in Brussels, last week’s Council Conclusions provide a very comprehensive set of measures to be taken by the Commission and EU Member States in the coming period. Key notions are “tailor made, case-by-case”; holistic, multi-stakeholder approach; sharing of experiences and lessons-learned; training; monitoring and evaluation; more funding; and international cooperation. Not surprisingly, both CEP and ICCT are explicitly mentioned.

These lists of recommendations are long and I won’t mention them all; rather, allow me to highlight four that we at ICCT believe are vital:

First: reintegration begins in prison: the way detained extremists are treated in prison, will determine how they leave prison. If they are treated differently to other inmates, this will provide them with ammunition to accuse the authorities of discrimination. This implies that detention itself must be designed with the aim of reducing the likelihood of recurrent violent behavior upon release. Start with the end in mind. While reintegration of extremists may seem counter-intuitive and “soft”, it isn’t; on the contrary, securing our societies demands targeted interventions.

Second: this notion underscores the critical importance of proper planning, monitoring and evaluation, including detailed descriptions of objectives, stakeholder responsibilities, and implementation guidelines.

Third: Although **risk assessments** are never a silver bullet, **investing** in risk assessment tools and instruments and training staff in their use, is extremely important. The more information collected and assessed by a multidisciplinary team of professionals, the better. Several tools have been created specifically for violent extremist populations. One is the Extremist Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+) developed by the British National Offender Management Service. It assesses offenders on 22 cognitive and behavioural factors. The second is the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA), developed by Dr. Elaine Pressman, which measures attitudinal, contextual, historical, protective and demographic factors that may be indicative

of both radicalization and de-radicalisation. A third, developed by Arie Kruglanski and colleagues, has produces promising results in measuring the attitudes and behavioural intentions of extremists. ICCT is currently working with Dr. Pressman and Arie Kruglanski to develop an assessment tool that combines both methods.

Fourth, and this is not addressed in any of the mentioned documents: How the government **communicates** its policies and practices to the public is critically important. A lack of information, or the wrong tone, will only feed anxiety among the public and could easily backfire.

Conclusion

Global, regional and national trends and developments - terrorism, migration, intractable conflict and war, islamophobia and xenophobia – are likely to have a polarizing effect on European societies and can easily fuel radicalisation and extremism. Radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism are here to stay, and this may only be the beginning.

How we define radicalisation and violent extremism will determine our policies and instruments. A “hard security” approach alone will be insufficient, counterproductive even. Acknowledging the critical role of prisons and probation is a good start; but we will need to invest far more in our understanding of the phenomenon; in front-end prevention; in comprehensive de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes; in risk assessment; and in training and capacity building.

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