RSIS COMMENTARY

11 September 2025

Twenty-Four Years After 9/11: Reinventing Deradicalisation in the Digital Age

Kristian Alexander

RSiS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Ponder the Improbable since 1996

RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 187 – 11 September 2025

Twenty-Four Years After 9/11: Reinventing Deradicalisation in the Digital Age

By Kristian Alexander

SYNOPSIS

Deradicalisation programmes emerged after 9/11 to address the limits of military responses by focusing on rehabilitation, reintegration, and reducing recidivism. Early initiatives in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Southeast Asia, and Europe revealed mixed results and challenges in measuring success. With extremism now decentralised, digitally driven, and more ideologically diverse, effective programmes emphasise prevention, community trust, psychological and social support, and integration, making them a necessary complement to traditional security measures.

COMMENTARY

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks marked a turning point in counterterrorism. In their wake, the United States and its allies relied heavily on military intervention and intelligence-led campaigns. Yet the persistence of Al Qaeda and the rise of Daesh revealed that hard power alone could not defeat extremist ideologies. This realisation spurred the development of deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes, aimed at reintegration and reducing recidivism by addressing the ideological, social, and psychological drivers of violence.

Nearly a quarter-century later, deradicalisation remains a key, if contested pillar of counterterrorism. Its trajectory from experimental efforts in Saudi Arabia and Southeast Asia to broader prevention of violent extremism (PVE) strategies across Europe and the Middle East shows how approaches have shifted in response to evolving threats. But today's environment is different: extremists are often decentralised, self-radicalised, and digitally networked, raising doubts about whether old methods can still be effective.

The Pioneers: First Programmes and Their Lessons

The first generation of deradicalisation programmes emerged in the early 2000s, as governments realised incarceration and military operations alone were insufficient. Most programmes lasted six months to two years, with long-term monitoring and rehabilitation.

• Saudi Arabia's Munasaha (Dialogue) programme (2004) offered militants an alternative to lengthy prison terms. It combined religious counter-narratives from clerics, psychological counselling, and economic reintegration. Officially, success rates exceeded 80 per cent, but some graduates, such as Said Ali al-Shihri, the deputy of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) relapsed. The programme's strength was its comprehensive approach, addressing ideology, psychology, and material needs but this could not ensure permanent behavioural change.

• Yemen's Dialogue Committee (2002-2005) pioneered theological debates with imprisoned jihadists. But the absence of monitoring or reintegration meant that relapse rates were high, and the programme collapsed as terrorism resurged. The experience underscored that theological debate alone cannot overcome structural drivers of extremism such as poverty, conflict, and weak state authority.

• Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) required detainees to undergo months or years of one-on-one counselling with clerics and psychologists. While resource-intensive, the programme reported low recidivism. Indonesia initially used shorter, less comprehensive interventions that often failed, though later expanded to include family reintegration and vocational training. The Indonesian case showed how cost constraints and uneven implementation can limit impact even when programmes are well designed.

• Europe's Prevent Strategy (UK) sought to engage individuals deemed "at risk" even outside prison. While broad in scope, critics said it stigmatised communities and eroded trust. In contrast, Denmark's Aarhus model emphasised voluntary participation, mentorship, and community partnerships – costly but effective at lowering recidivism.

These early programmes revealed key dilemmas: recidivism rates were unreliable success measures, transparency was rare, and the distinction between deradicalisation (changing beliefs) and disengagement (ending violence while retaining ideology) complicated evaluations. Many participants feigned compliance to gain release, underscoring the need for long-term support and nuanced metrics. Some European programmes, such as the Netherlands' "Exit" initiative, began experimenting with independent evaluations and annual reports to improve accountability, but such practices remain rare.

Extremism in the Digital Age

As terrorism evolved, so did deradicalisation. Al Qaeda's hierarchical model gave way to Daesh's decentralised networks, inspiring lone actors globally. Programmes had to address not only organised militants but also self-radicalised individuals with no criminal history.

Digital platforms amplified the challenge: radicalisation increasingly occurs online, prompting experiments in "tele-deradicalisation", digital counter-narratives, and AI-based risk assessments. However, their effectiveness and privacy implications remain unclear. Online interventions face two major problems: first, they struggle to compete with the sheer volume and sophistication of extremist propaganda. Second, they often lack credibility among target audiences, especially when state-sponsored.

Another shift has been from reactive to preventative strategies. Early programmes intervened post-arrest, but newer models, such as the UK's Channel programme, aim to act earlier, sometimes before crimes are committed. Similarly, Denmark and Singapore stress family engagement, mentorship, and gradual reintegration. Prevention frameworks reflect a philosophical shift: from rehabilitating convicted militants to building resilience in vulnerable populations before violence occurs.

Interventions have also expanded beyond ideology. Research highlights that radicalisation often stems as much from social marginalisation and psychological vulnerability as from belief. Modern programmes combine counselling, trauma support, and vocational training, tailored through structured tools like VERA-2R and ERG22+. Importantly, voluntariness and trust-building increasingly matter, though coercion still dominates in security-heavy states.

Grassroots and NGO initiatives have gained prominence. EXIT-Deutschland helps neo-Nazis disengage, Life After Hate assists US extremists, and Kenya's BRAVE initiative mobilises youth and women against propaganda**.** Such programmes highlight the value of peer-to-peer credibility and localised legitimacy, often succeeding where state-led efforts face mistrust. However, they remain underfunded and struggle to scale.

Measuring Success and Emerging Challenges

In terms of outcome, the evidence suggests a mixed picture. Programmes that combine voluntariness, long-term support, and community trust, such as Denmark's Aarhus model or Singapore's RRG, reduce recidivism significantly. Short, ideological-only interventions often fail.

Duration and depth are critical. Short interventions of six months or less rarely shift entrenched worldviews, whereas multi-year engagement with counselling, monitoring, and reintegration offers better prospects. The rise of Daesh returnees has added further complexity, with Kazakhstan repatriating women and children through tailored packages, and Germany combining prosecution with case management.

The scope of deradicalisation has also broadened. No longer confined to jihadism, it now includes far-right extremism, conspiracy-driven ideologies, and ethno-nationalist violence. Programmes targeting white supremacists in the US or neo-Nazis in Germany face different cultural and ideological dynamics than Islamist-focused efforts, making transferability difficult.

Another unresolved issue is how to measure success. Recidivism is too narrow: some participants never reoffend but retain extremist sympathies, while others disengage ideologically but remain socially isolated. More comprehensive evaluations must consider attitudinal change, community reintegration, and the risk of "instrumental compliance," where participants pretend to reform.

From 9/11 to 2025 and Beyond

Deradicalisation began after 9/11 as an experimental, detainee-centred approach. Today, it is broader, more preventative, and increasingly digital. Coercive counselling in prisons is insufficient. Communities, families, and digital ecosystems must play central roles. The expansion to far-right extremism, integration of technology, and rise of grassroots programmes demonstrate how the field has diversified.

Still, deradicalisation is not a silver bullet. Uneven outcomes and political controversies persist. But abandoning it would be short-sighted: when adapted to modern realities, it remains a necessary complement to hard security. The challenge is to innovate without overpromising, ensuring programmes are transparent, inclusive, and sufficiently resourced to maintain credibility.

Immigration, Integration, and the Broader Context

Deradicalisation debates cannot be divorced from wider social tensions, particularly around immigration. In parts of Europe, mass immigration without effective integration has sparked backlash. Governments are accused of labelling critics as "extremists," while immigrant communities face alienation and exclusion. Both dynamics can drive radicalisation—immigrants disillusioned by marginalisation, and native populations gravitating toward far-right ideologies.

This tension creates a paradox: counter-extremism programmes risk undermining their legitimacy if they appear politically motivated, yet failing to address integration challenges leaves fertile ground for both jihadist and far-right radicalisation.

Thus, effective deradicalisation must go hand-in-hand with integration, civic education, and inclusive dialogue. Without such efforts, counter-extremism risks being seen as a tool of suppression rather than prevention.

Conclusion

Nearly 25 years after 9/11, deradicalisation is at a crossroads. Programmes that are voluntary, sustained, and community-driven show promise, especially when addressing socio-economic as well as ideological drivers. Failures occur where initiatives are short-term, coercive, or lack trust.

In an era of hybrid, digital, and decentralised extremism, deradicalisation must be reinvented, not discarded. Its future lies in building trust, investing in communities, and recognising that extremist pathways are diverse and evolving. By integrating families, communities, and digital platforms, while addressing immigration and integration challenges, states can reshape deradicalisation for a world where extremism is diffuse, leaderless, and increasingly digital.

Dr Kristian Alexander is a Senior Fellow and Lead Researcher at the Rabdan Security and Defence Institute (RSD), Abu Dhabi, UAE.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.