

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Exeter
Unit of Assessment: Area Studies
Title of case study: De-radicalization and Jihadism: informing policy makers and informing public debate and understanding
<p>1.Summary of the impact</p> <p>The rise in Islamist armed activism has led to de-radicalization being seen as a major means of preventing terrorism, alongside classic security and counter-terrorism tactics. Since 2008, Dr Omar Ashour, from the University of Exeter, has emerged as a leading expert on de-radicalization and transitions from armed to unarmed activism, advising governments (e.g. UK, Canada, Netherlands), intergovernmental organisations (e.g. UN and EU) and NGOs. His research has informed policy-makers and debate, and contributed to developing initiatives in de-radicalization, both inside and outside of the Muslim world. His extensive media involvement has raised the level of public debate and public understanding both within the UK and internationally.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Ideological de-radicalization is a process within Islamist movements in which the ideology is transformed, in the sense of de-legitimizing the use of armed tactics to achieve revolutionary political goals. Following his appointment as Lecturer in the Politics of the Modern Arab World at the University of Exeter in 2008, Dr Omar Ashour continued his research in this area, resulting in his major monograph, <i>“The De-Radicalization of Jihadists”</i>, in 2009, published by ORutledge in their prestigious series <i>Critical Studies in Terrorism</i>. It was the first study of its kind. It was based on frontline fieldwork, including interviews with jihadist leaders, mid-ranking commanders, and young sympathizers, as well as former security and intelligence officers and state officials in Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Canada and the United Kingdom. In it, Ashour delineated the factors which cause armed Islamist movements to de-radicalize, ideologically, behaviourally and organizationally. Chris Mcmillan summarizes the book in his review in <i>International Affairs</i>: “Ashour manages to provide a highly detailed, very well-presented analysis of how and why several of the most important armed Islamist movements over the last 70 years have successfully sought to fundamentally alter their ideology, behaviour and structure and why this has been unattainable for others.” The book provided the first analysis of the de-radicalization processes of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers (1951-1973), subsequent former allies of al-Qa’ida (including al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad Organization) and more recent Algerian Islamist groups (1997-2008). Ashour used mainly social movement theory to analyse how state policies (the main focus was on security bureaucracies), charismatic leadership, and social interaction with secular groups can all interact to shape the prospects for de-radicalization and participation in pluralist, democratic politics. The book received excellent reviews by renowned experts in the field published in prestigious journals such as <i>World Politics</i> (reviewed by Professor Jillian Schwedler) and <i>Perspectives on Politics</i> (reviewed by Dr Thomas Hegghammer). Ashour’s analysis of the practical mechanisms of de-radicalization, investigating both individual cases and collective movement shifts to non-violence, was presented in <i>“Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformation of Armed Islamist Movements”</i> (July 2011).</p> <p>Ashour expanded his research to include other countries and regions (Gaza, Tunisia, Netherlands and Singapore), the transitions from militia to party politics by Islamists and the limitation of risks and security threats (cf. <i>“Hamis and the Prospects of De-Radicalization”</i>). He completed additional fieldwork in Libya in March 2010 and August 2011, with a focus on the transformation of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and its interactions with al-Qaddafi’s regime. In March 2010, the LIFG reconciled with the Qaddafi regime and officially abandoned and de-legitimized armed tactics. The plan was to reintegrate its members in the society and possibly in some of the official institutions. But the LIFG joined the armed revolution against the Libyan dictator, and its commanders spearheaded the attack on his headquarters in August 2011. However, after the removal of Qaddafi, the LIFG transformed into party and electoral politics. (cf. “Libyan Islamists Unpacked: Rise, Transformation, and Future).</p> <p>One major finding from Ashour’s fieldwork was the development of the notion of “Post-Jihadism”, encompassing former jihadists who, after reflecting on their experience, seek alternative non-violent means for socio-political change, and adopt ideological and theological stances to legitimate those means. Case studies for the research on this, carried out between 2009 and 2012 were drawn from Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Yemen. (cf. <i>“Post-Jihadism and Ideological De-Radicalization.”</i>). The focus of this research was twofold: the theological and the</p>

ideological dimensions of de-radicalization (as opposed to the behavioural and the organizational dimensions outlined in his earlier book), and the impact of these transformations on democratisation and the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa. Another major finding pertains to the persistence of the transitions. Ashour argues that these transitions cannot persist unless there is a comprehensive process of security sector reform and balanced civil-military relations (cf “Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformation of Armed Islamist Movements;” cf “From Bad Cop to Good Cop: The Challenge of Security Sector Reform in Egypt).

3. References to the research

Research Publications

1. Ashour, O. (2009) *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. New York, London: Routledge. ISSN: 978-0-415-58834-8
 - Evidence of quality: peer reviewed monograph in prestigious series; excellent reviews in leading journals (*World Politics, Perspective on Politics, International Affairs*).
2. Ashour, O. (2012) “*From Bad Cop to Good Cop: The Challenge of Security Sector Reform in Egypt.*” *Brookings –Stanford Papers*. Washington DC; Doha: Brookings Institution, November 2012. <http://stanford.io/17AducT>
 - Evidence of quality: peer-reviewed paper that has been highly cited; used as basis for UN-ESCWA and FCO consultations (see below).
3. Ashour, O. (2012) “*Libyan Islamists Unpacked: Rise, Transformation, and Future.*” *Brookings Papers*. Washington DC; Doha: Brookings Institution, May 2012. <http://bit.ly/JzJJga>
 - Evidence of quality: peer-reviewed paper that has been highly cited; used as basis for FCO consultations on Libya (see below).
4. Ashour, O. (2011) “*Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements.*” *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 23 (3): 377-397. DOI:10.1080/09546553.2011.560218
 - Evidence of quality: peer-reviewed article in highly ranked journal.
5. Ashour, O. (2011) “*Post-Jihadism and Ideological De-Radicalization.*” In *Contextualizing Jihadi Ideologies*, edited by Zaheer Kazimi and Jeevan Doel. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. ISSN: 9780231702546
 - Evidence of quality: peer-reviewed chapter in a prestigious series; used as basis for UN-CTITF and FCO consultations (see below).
6. Ashour, O. (2011) “*Hamas and the Prospects of De-Radicalization.*” In *Violent Non-State Actors in Contemporary World Politics*, edited by Klejda Mulaj. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. ISSN: 1849040168
 - Evidence of quality: peer-reviewed chapter in a prestigious series; used as basis for UN-CTITF consultations (see below).

4. Details of the impact

Ashour’s research and fieldwork have led to **two key areas of impact: informing policy debate** through citations in policy documents and practice and **enhancing public understanding** of Islamist issues through engagement with the media.

In March 2009, Ashour informed policy makers by speaking at two consultation events organised by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). “*Promoting Political Freedoms and Deepening Democracy*” and “*Common Security Challenges in the Maghreb and the Sahel*” were attended by members of the Cabinet and Home Office and the Department for International Development. Following the publication of his book, Ashour participated in consultation events with the Ditchley Foundation in February 2010, entitled “*Countering Radicalization in Local Communities*”; the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (“*Security Threats in North Africa*”, Rabat, May 2010) and the International Association for the Chiefs of Police (“*De-Radicalization Processed and Programs*”, Paris, May 2010). In the US in 2010, Ashour was invited by the RAND Corporation and Carnegie Endowment to contribute to consultations with US Government. These resulted in publications of policy papers such as *De-Radicalizing Islamist Extremists* (published by RAND) which stated that: “the only major work on the subject [collective de-radicalization] is Omar Ashour’s *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists.*” (p. 188) and Ashour is cited 30 times. Following this, Ashour informed policy debate by being cited six times in the US Counter-terrorism White Paper on “*Protecting the Homeland from Domestic and International Terrorism Threats Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalization and Disengagement*” (2010).

As the Arab world began to experience major political transitions, Ashour was a constant source of advice. His research was described by United Nations' ESCWA as "extremely important in tailoring realistic and context-driven security sector reform recommendations and...serve to increase the debate among security sector practitioners in the region and press upon Arab governments the need for reform".

In March 2011, he was a panellist on three separate occasions at the House of Commons: the first organised by the Committee for Democratic Libya ("*Libya: The Case for Intervention*"), the second organised by the Council for Arab-British Understanding ("*The Fall of the Pharaoh: How will it Impact the United Kingdom's Foreign Policy*") and, lastly, the Henry Jackson Society ("*Moral Imperatives and Strategic Interests - Western Policy after the Egyptian Revolution*"). These were attended by MPs, the media, and NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Medecins Sans Frontieres.

Ashour argued for intervention in Libya, and for engagement with Islamists and former Islamists in Egypt and Libya. In the latter area in particular, he influenced FCO philosophy with regard to post-Jihadists such as Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, the former head of Tripoli Military Council, the LIFG, and the leader of al-Watan Party, whom Ashour had interviewed. In March 2011 he presented a paper to the FCO, entitled "*De-Radicalization and Civil Resistance in Egypt and Libya*". Since FCO representatives and diplomatic and foreign office staff from 15 countries were present, Ashour fed into FCO philosophy with regard to former militants and their future political role in the country. In May 2011, he was invited by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) to Lucca, Italy to present to British, European, American and Canadian senior security officials on "*Downstream Interventions: Rehabilitation and De-radicalization*" during a consultation on *Policies to Counter the Appeal of Terrorism*. FCO, Home and EU counter-terrorism coordinator, Gilles De Kerchove, and the head of the United Nation's al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, Richard Barrett, and the other officials were present. Ashour has been strongly advocating democracy and ending dictatorship in his country of origin, Egypt. After the Egyptian revolution in 2011, he was consulted by both the first Egyptian elected civilian President in August and September 2012 as well as the National Security Committee of Egyptian Parliament in March 2012 on security sector reform and transformation of Islamists from armed to unarmed activism, with special focus on the Sinai Peninsula. In July 2012, he was asked by the British Embassy in Cairo and the FCO to lead a research project on countering violent extremism in Egypt, with focus on the Sinai. Between November 2012 and September 2013, the FCO invited Ashour to a series of discussions on Islamist transitions and security sector reform in Egypt and Libya. The meetings were attended by several senior officials including, Minister Alastair Burt, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State. Some of the meetings were held under the title of 'The Jubilee Dialogues,' flagship series of debates organized by the FCO bringing together leading thinkers to discuss some of the major drivers behind transformation in societies across the world (https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/conference/wp1253/#conference_introduction). On 11 February 2013 the Department for International Development (DFID) invited Ashour to speak about de-radicalization and the Arab Awakening. Ashour also gave a lecture on the same topic in the Advanced Command and Staff Course (ACSC) in Joint Services Command and Staff College, which was well-received by military officers from over 20 countries. This was organized by the Ministry of Defence on 25 February 2013. He was also invited to present his research findings in a roundtable table discussion with the British Home Secretary, Theresa May on 1 May 2013. Overall, the FCO summarized Dr Ashour's interactions with policy-makers: "an excellent example of how long-term academic research and a sustained investment in a relationship between governmental policymakers and academics can reap benefits in a fluid and changing situation such as that of the 'Arab Spring'."

In addition to informing policy debate, Ashour has raised the level of public debate and understanding of de-radicalization through his media engagement. He was interviewed over 400 times only during 2011/13 by various media outlets, both in the UK and abroad. Examples include the BBC 6 O'Clock News; "*Impact*" on BBC World News with Tim Willcox; Channel 4 News; BBC News Hour with Lyce Doucet, the 6.30 ITV News; CNN; Al-Jazeera (both English & Arabic); France 24; Russia Today and others. A key theme was the recognition that the opposition movements bringing about change were inevitably going to include Islamist and post-Islamist activists who have been de-radicalised, which developed directly out of Ashour's research. He has been quoted extensively in newspapers, including the Guardian (7 times during 2011/12); Financial

Impact case study (REF3b)

Times; Daily Telegraph; Times; Washington Post; Gulf Times; and Al-Ahram (Egypt). After the July 2013 coup in Egypt, *The Observer* ran an article by Ashour opposing Tony Blair's view on the opposite page that the military will bring democracy in Egypt and that the West should back the new regime. His expert contribution was described by al-Jazeera Network as "highly valued both by our organization and the audience" and his analysis of the evolving situation in the Middle East was described as follows: "widely contributed to educate our [al-Jazeera's] global audience." He also appeared in the Doha Debates in April 2011, contributing to a discussion aimed at raising public awareness on whether Arabs, not NATO, should be dealing with Libya. The Doha debates openly discuss Middle East issues and are broadcast by BBC World News eight times a year. The total potential global audience for The Debates is over 350 million.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

The following reports were either commissioned by government agencies on the basis of research findings, or are reports that had a particularly notable impact:

1. RAND Monograph: *De-Radicalizing Islamist Extremists*. Arlington: RAND Corporation, 2010 http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1053.pdf
2. Carnegie Endowment Event : <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/04/16/de-radicalization-in-egypt-algeria-and-libya/201v>
3. International Peace Institute (IPI) Briefing Paper: *Transforming Terrorists: Examining International Efforts to Address Violent Extremism*. New York: 2011. <http://www.ipinst.org/publication/policy-papers/detail/316-transforming-terrorists-examining-international-efforts-to-address-violent-extremism.html>
4. US counter terrorism White Paper: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf
5. Panellist. "Moral Imperatives and Strategic Interests - Western Policy after the Egyptian Revolution." Presentation in the House of Commons organized by the Henry Jackson Society, London, UK, 1 March 2011 <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/stories.asp?id=196>
6. The Guardian: Quoted in 7 articles during 2011/12
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/13/egypt-live-blog-morsi-military?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2012/jun/17/egypt-elections-shafiq-morsi-live?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2012/may/18/syria-aleppo-university-protests-live?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/15/tahrir-square-elbaradei-protesters?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/03/political-islam-poised-arab-spring?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/05/libyan-islamic-fighting-group-leaders?INTCMP=SRCH>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/07/saif-gaddafi-libya-reform?INTCMP=SRCH>
7. BBC Online <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14728565>
8. <http://english.aljazeera.net/category/person/omar-ashour>
9. Panellist in the Doha Debate on Libyan intervention (& broadcast on BBC World News) [Transcript]: <http://www.thedohadebates.com/debates/debate.asp?d=103&s=7&mode=transcript>
10. Letters from Youssef Chaitani (UN-ESCWA), Ihtisham Hibatullah (al-Jazeera), Martin Hetherington (FCO), Richard Barrett (UN-CTITF).