

Institution: University of East London

Unit of Assessment: 20

Title of case study: Improving international policy, practice and public understanding of radicalisation and disengagement from violent extremism

1. Summary of the impact

The research described here has informed discussion, debate, decision-making and practice among policy-makers working on counter-terrorism and radicalism both within and beyond the UK. It has contributed to the development and implementation of new tools supporting counter-terrorist work; enhanced understanding of important issues relating to terrorist psychology among professionals working in relevant areas; and informed international legal proceedings. These insights have strengthened and informed UK and international policy formulation and helped to generate strategies and practical tools for the implementation of counter-terrorism measures.

2. Underpinning research

Post 9/11, counter-terrorism – and particularly the ways in which people become involved in, and eventually leave, terrorist groups - has become a major social and political issue. Andrew Silke (Professor of Criminology at UEL since 2005) has led UEL research responding to this by exploring processes of radicalisation, de-radicalisation and disengagement with violent extremism. The work, which particularly examines psychological facets of terrorism [1, 2, 5, 6], has yielded pioneering insights into these processes, originating partly from its rejection of approaches to radicalisation based on personality traits and mental illness, and of models based on de-radicalisation theories. Instead, it emphasises the critical roles of social psychological processes and suggests that disengagement is an unexceptional – and even inevitable – process for most terrorists.

These insights stem particularly from two research studies commissioned in 2006 by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and in 2007 by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). The MoD study involved a comprehensive review of then-current understanding of the theories and models of terrorist disengagement. Key research findings included the insights that disengagement is usually catalysed by a complex set of factors, including declining interaction with peers who support involvement in terrorism and creation, instead, of new relationships supporting a life away from the terrorist group. Isolation from terrorist peers is therefore a vital factor in facilitating disengagement, a finding with important implications for terrorist imprisonment policies. The research also elucidated the role in the disengagement process of ‘turning point’ events, which provide subjects whose commitment to terrorism might previously have been weakening with a clear justification for leaving [2]. Building on this work, the NOMS study assessed current prison-based interventions for terrorist offenders and examined the evidence for developing new interventions aimed at disengagement in the area of violent extremism. This study illustrated both the importance of offering extremist prisoners programmes to provide a route out of extremism whilst they were incarcerated, and the lack of such programme for prisoners in England and Wales, recommending strongly that this should be addressed [2]. The work also incorporated an assessment of foreign programmes based on religious de-radicalisation; it challenged the claims of success attributed to these programmes, highlighting their unlikely efficacy for hard-core members of terrorist movements. The research concluded that a prison-based programme was required in England and Wales, but that this did not have to have a religious foundation to be effective.

Further contributions to this body of research have come from Dr John Morrison, who joined UEL as Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice in 2011. Morrison and Silke’s work, which is based on extensive interviews with convicted terrorists, as well as analyses of published documentation, has illuminated the role of ordinary psychological processes and small group dynamics to understanding radicalisation [1, 5]. More specifically, it has shown that involvement is usually a gradual process, wherein identity issues and social networks are important factors. Contrary to expectations, the research also demonstrated that eventual disengagement is normal for most terrorists and that recidivism is remarkably low [2]. Crucially, however, it highlights distinctions between disengagement and de-radicalisation, arguing for a more sophisticated understanding of how involvement in terrorism ends [2, 5, 6].

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A final strand of the research underpinning impacts described here has been produced by Dr Anthony Richards (UEL 2007-), whose work on the conceptualisation of terrorism, radicalisation and extremism [3, 4] has particularly assessed the impact of discourses of 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' on the widening remit and parameters of UK counter-terrorism. The results of his work on this, and on the remit of the 'Prevent' strand of the British government's counter-terrorism strategy, have been delivered in briefings to, and meetings with, policymakers and practitioners at both national (Home Office, Foreign Office) and local level (Birmingham, Newham).

3. References to the research

[1] Silke, A. (2008). 'Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalisation.' *European Journal of Criminology*, 5/1, pp.99-123. Peer-reviewed article. Identified in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2012) as one of 'Twenty Important Journal Articles and Reports on Radicalisation to, and De-Radicalisation from, Terrorism' (<http://bit.ly/1a0iJN8>). Submitted to REF 2.

[2] Silke, A. (2011). *The Psychology of Counter-Terrorism*. London: Routledge. Identified in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2012) as one of the 'Top 150 books on terrorism and counter-terrorism' (<http://bit.ly/1a8DLLH>). Submitted to REF 2.

[3] Richards, A. (2011). 'The problem with 'radicalisation', the remit of 'Prevent', and the need to refocus on terrorism in the UK.' *International Affairs*, 87/1, pp.143-152. Peer-reviewed journal ranked 15th out of 80 among international relations journals. Article available on request.

[4] Richards, A., 'Characterising the UK Terrorist Threat: The Problem with Non-Violent Ideology as Focus for Counter-Terrorism and Terrorism as the Product of 'Vulnerability'', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Volume 3, Issue 1, (2012). Peer-reviewed journal. Article available on request.

[5] Morrison, J.F. (2011) 'Why Do People Become Dissident Irish Republicans?' In Currie, P.M. and Taylor, M. (eds.) *Dissident Irish Republicanism*, pp.17-42. London: Continuum International Publishing Group. Article available on request.

[6] Morrison, J.F. (2013) 'The Psychology of Terrorism: Current Understanding and Vital Next Steps.' In Kamien, D (ed.) *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook* Second Edition, pp.45-58. New York: McGraw-Hill. Article available on request.

4. Details of the impact

Contributions to discussion, debate and policy formulation relating to counter-terrorism:

The influence of Silke's research has been realised particularly through his membership of and contribution to numerous expert panels and policy committees, including the British Psychological Society's working group on the Psychological Risk Assessment of those Convicted or Detained under Terrorist Related Offences from 2007 - 2011. In 2009, he was appointed a Specialist Advisor to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee for its inquiry into the UK Government's programme for preventing violent extremism, in which role he provided an invited briefing on understanding radicalisation to the Committee at the start of its enquiry at the House of Commons, 14 July 2009 [a].

Major research findings, including about the implications of contemporary discourses of radicalisation and extremism for the remit and parameters of counter-terrorism policymaking [4], have also been shared with policy-makers via their invited presentation in local and national policy forums. These have included briefings provided to the Home Office (Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism leadership programme: Silke, July 2009; and Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, Home Office: Richards, February, 2013); Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Richards, July 2010); and local 'Prevent' coordinators in Newham and Birmingham (Richards, July 2012 and June 2010 respectively). Richards' paper on radicalisation and 'Prevent' [3] was presented in Birmingham as part of a one-day conference ('Unravelling Extremisms: Informing the Debate') to enhance the local authority's understanding of radicalisation and 'extremisms'. Attendees, who numbered around 100 in total, included local authority employees, those involved in the delivery of 'Prevent' (including private contractors), and local police representatives.

Contributions to international policy formulation. Contributions have also been made to international policy discussion through Silke's presentation of research findings to a Pakistan delegation, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (London, 11 February 2011); and to Senior Government Officials from Azerbaijan (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, 16 June 2009). In some cases, those findings have informed significant shifts in international policy formulation.

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On 22 November 2010, Silke used expertise gained through the underpinning research on the psychology of counter-terrorism to provide invited oral testimony (via video link) to the Canadian Special Senate Committee on Anti-terrorism (CSSC), a body created in May 2010 to undertake a “comprehensive review of the provisions and operation of the Anti-terrorism Act and to study legislation related to anti-terrorism”. Silke drew on findings published in [1] and [2] to advise the Committee on radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism; this testimony informed the development by the Committee of its 2011 report *Security, Freedom and the Complex Terrorist Threat: Positive Steps Ahead*. That report draws strongly on advice provided by Silke in recommending the provision of federal government support for further research into “the transition from radicalization into violence in Canada...in order to better understand and prevent violent extremism.” It acknowledges Silke as an expert witness, and cites his support for its recommendation that Canada should make use of its existing justice system for criminal offences in responding to the threat of terrorism [b]. Since the debate was judged to be in the public interest Silke’s testimony was, moreover, broadcast live on the internet and recorded for later broadcast on television in Canada; a transcription of his testimony was also made available online [c]. As such, his expertise in this area contributed, not just to specialist policy discussion and debate, but also to broader public awareness of important issues relating to the research.

Improving understanding and developing new tools for counter-terrorist professionals.

Prison staff: In 2009, Silke drew on research conducted as part of the NOMS study [2] to give invited presentations at two national conferences organised by the Ministry of Justice. Those presentations focussed on key findings relating to the management and reform of terrorist prisoners, around 130 of whom are currently incarcerated in prisons in England & Wales. These led to further invitations to share those findings more widely – and thereby improve understanding of prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offences - through guest lectures for a combined total of more than 250 staff working with such prisoners at UK prisons including: HMP Full Sutton (13 October 2009), HMP Frankland (27 April 2010), and HMP Feltham (29 March 2011). Silke has also used his research to enhance understanding of terrorist psychology among representatives of policing and security bodies, including the Territorial Policing CT Showcase 2008 (31 July 2008), Olympic Security Directorate (30 June 2009), and Metropolitan Police (13 January 2010).

That research has further supported the **development of new risk assessment tools** for use in evaluating terrorist and extremist offenders. In 2008, Silke applied his expertise in terrorist psychology, terrorists in prison and terrorist disengagement as a member of an advisory group of experts on psychological risk assessment, set up to inform the development by the NOMS Operational Intervention Services Group of the **Extremism Risk Guidance (ERG22+)**. This new risk assessment tool, which was launched in 2011, particularly followed the group’s recommendation for a structured risk guidance approach specifically designed for use with terrorist prisoners [d]. Prior to its development, prison authorities had no risk assessment tool validated for use with such prisoners. Between 2011 and the end of 2012, the new tool had been used to improve the ability of prison psychologists and offender managers to conduct risk assessments of more than 80 terrorist and extremist prisoners in England and Wales; it is expected that assessments of the remaining 40-45 prisoners will be made by the end of 2013 [e]. The ERG is now regarded as the primary risk assessment tool for such prisoners in England and Wales; a modified version has been adapted by the Police, who use it in community settings to divert potential extremists from pathways to terrorist activity [e]. Silke’s research also helped inform the development of **VERA-2** [f], the only other risk assessment tool available for use with terrorist and extremist prisoners, which is used widely in prisons in Australia and Canada. Finally, in 2012, precisely in line with the recommendations made in [2], the National Offender Management Service introduced its **Healthy Identities Intervention programme** to support extremist prisoners’ disengagement from extremism. The programme is now available to all terrorism- and extremism-related prisoners in England and Wales.

Military personnel: Invited talks have also been delivered to improve understanding among UK and international military professionals, including through addresses to the Advanced Command and Staff Course of the UK Defence Academy (28 March 2011); and Higher Command and Staff Course, Joint Services Command, and Staff College, Defence Academy (Swindon, 23 January 2009). Between 2010 and 2011 Morrison was the project manager on the government-funded Violent Dissident Republicanism project, in which role he gave regular private briefings to both the

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Police Service of Northern Ireland and the British Security Services. Silke has contributed to a Senior Command and Staff Course of The Military College, Irish Defence Forces, (Ireland, 18 January 2010). Further afield, Morrison was invited in 2012 to present his findings on radicalisation within prisons at a NATO Advanced Research Workshop in Ankara at the NATO Centre of Excellence-Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT). Attendants included approximately 25 senior military personnel from North Africa and South-Eastern Europe who are currently involved in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue [g]. As a result of his participation in this event, Morrison was commissioned in November 2012 to help develop a programme to assist the Nigerian government in countering Boko Haram: a 5-day workshop was subsequently delivered in 13-17 May 2013 [h].

Enhanced public awareness of and engagement with important social and political issues.

As well as informing policy discussion and formulation and supporting improvements in practice, the research has fed into public debates on issues relating to terrorism and counter-terrorism. Silke's research has been covered extensively in both national and international media outlets, allowing him to inform media discourse, share key findings with a wide non-academic audience and thereby increase public awareness of and engagement with significant social and political issues and events relating to terrorism. To that end, he has appeared on over 100 national and international media programmes since 2008, including news and current affairs programmes for the BBC, Sky News, CNN, ITV and Channel 4. He has also been interviewed regularly on radio and in printed press outlets with very large readerships, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine, and *La Repubblica*. His work on terrorist psychology and critical incident psychology has also been the focus of a number of television documentaries, including the BBC Horizon episode "How to Survive a Disaster" first broadcast on 10 Mar 2009 on BBC 2 to 1.7 million viewers [i]. More recently, Morrison has also made a significant contribution to national and international media-led debates on terrorism: in the aftermath of the Boston bombings he was commissioned to write analysis for both the Irish Post and City AM, whilst a piece on cnn.com, analysing the threat posed by dissident Irish Republicans to the G8 summit, made a significant contribution to international media and public discussion of that event. The original article, which drew on his research on the rising threat of dissident Irish Republicanism from the Violent Dissident Republicanism project [5], received 456 separate comments on CNN's webpage and was recommended by 325 people on Facebook; it was reproduced by at least 23 news outlets across three continents [j].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] For Silke's 2009 appointment as a Specialist Adviser to the House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee: <http://bit.ly/1g5z8rV> p. 30

[b] For the influence of Silke's research on recommendations made in the CSSC report, *Security, Freedom and the Complex Terrorist Threat*: <http://bit.ly/1eYfxqD> pp. 28 and 48

[c] For transcript of Silke's testimonial to the CSSC: <http://bit.ly/H26MQj>. Also available in French.

[d] For Silke's membership of the advisory group guiding development of ERG22+: Monica Lloyd & Christopher Dean (2012), 'Intervening with extremist offenders.' *Forensic Update*, 105, pp.35-38. Document available on request.

[e] For the use of ERG22+: Monica Lloyd (2012). 'Learning from casework and the literature.' *Prison Service Journal*, 203, pp. 23-30. <http://bit.ly/1arnCRH>

[f] For citation of Silke's research in reference to VERA-2 development: Pressman, D.E. & Flockton, J.S. (2012). 'Calibrating risk for violent political extremists: The VERA-2 Structural Assessment.' *The British Journal of Forensic Practice*, 14, (4) pp. 237-251. DOI: <http://doi.org/pnr>

[g] For Morrison's contribution to the NATO Advanced Research Workshop: <http://bit.ly/1gUBQ54>

[h] For the workshop for the Nigerian government on countering Boko Haram <http://bit.ly/1eYZysk>

[i] For BBC Horizon, "How to Survive a Disaster": <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00j7p7z>

[j] For the CNN article by Morrison: <http://cnn.it/16F1qBb>