The task set for the workshop from which this short paper has emerged was how to understand the global conflict constellations relating to religion and the radicalisation of religious groups after 9/11. At the same time the workshop was asked to address the challenge of how to resolve conflicts and curb radicalisation in situations where religious aspects seem to play a role. An obvious issue arising from this task (but which will not be addressed in what follows) is to explore further in what sense might religion and its relationship with conflict be different from political ideology and conflict? If we take as our primary perspective, radicalization, political violence and conflict, then religion is not the only form of strongly-held view that seems to have associations with conflict. But if, for the moment, we leave that aside, a further implicit quality of the workshop task is the assumption that radicalisation (a complex term which as we will see probably adds little to the debate) is in some way related to conflict (which, in the sense used in this paper, is taken to relate to political violence and terrorism), and furthermore that curbing radicalisation will contribute to conflict and violence resolution. Whilst it might seem perverse to question that assumption, in what follows I will attempt to at least raise some doubts and uncertainties.

Perhaps the starting point is to explore what we mean by radicalisation, and what its relationship to conflict might be. Radicalisation is a complex term, lacking any agreed definition. It is sometimes used to refer to people simply holding extreme views but not necessarily acting on them; sometimes it is used to refer to people who respond in an ideological way to oppressive circumstances and who support radical or violent action; and sometimes it is used to refer to people who express ideological views through violence. Research in this area tends to be very strong on assertion, and light on evidence, but there are a number of points that we can make with reasonable confidence about the relationship between radical views and terrorism:

1) Not every radical will become involved in terrorism or political violence; in fact we might say even more strongly that very few radicals become involved in any kind of violence, let alone terrorist violence. It might appear obvious to state this, but failure to understand its implications is a testament to the poorly understood relationship between radicalisation and terrorism (radicalisation in this sense generally being thought of as the acquisition of certain beliefs, values or attitudes deemed, in hindsight, conducive to support for terrorism, but...
not necessarily the commission of an illegal act of violence).

2) A converse point related to this, but rarely acknowledged, is that not every terrorist is necessarily ‘radical’ (i.e. holding politically extreme views, as opposed to engaging in violent behaviour). We lack good evidence on the implications of this, but it may be the case, for example, that this applies to political leadership more than grass root activists. Political violence is frequently thought of as instrumental in character and as Clausewitz notes, war (and in our context we might reasonably extend this to other forms of less structured violence) is “… a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means”. As an instrument of political discourse, radicalisation might be a useful adjunct to enable the expression of violence, but equally it may not be a necessary requirement for the expression of violence. Implicit in much of the literature on de-radicalisation is an assumption of a causal relationship between radical views and the dangerous behaviour of terrorism. Even if this is the case, in causal terms the reciprocal of this has certainly not been proven. Indeed, probably the best we can say is that whilst radical views might be a necessary condition for the emergence of terrorism, they are not a sufficient account in themselves of terrorist behaviour. Given this, the idea of ‘de-radicalisation’ as a prerequisite for risk reduction of terrorism and political violence is at the least questionable.

3) To develop this point further, we clearly need to distinguish between those who undertake terrorist acts and engage in political violence, and those who use/construct/direct/make sense of terrorist acts but do not necessarily themselves engage in violence. Taylor and Horgan describe a process model of terrorist involvement, where distinctions can be made between different roles occupied by activists. This analysis was based on the structure of the Provisional IRA, but similar structures can be discerned in other organisations involved in terrorism and political violence. There is clearly task specialisation and a sense of progression and movement between different roles in politically violent organisations, such that members may occupy different roles at different times and that not all members of the organisation at any given time are necessarily even directly involved in the commission of terrorist acts, although they may occupy important roles. Indeed, to explore this further (and to reinforce Clausewitz’s comment above) we might, on occasions, see political violence as an incidental if necessary proxy for other activity.

A fundamental problem in analysing these complex issues is our lack of a clear understanding of the relationship between ideology and behaviour. There is often a rather naïve assumption that political attitudes and beliefs (and religious attitudes and beliefs) translate readily into behaviour, just as there is an often unchallenged assumption that social and economic disadvantage provide the motivating conditions for that translation to emerge. People do hold extreme views and people are socially disadvantaged, but the causal relationship is often ideologically asserted rather than being evidence based. Reality, unfortunately, is inconveniently complex, and such evidence that there is suggests assumptions about the relationship between extreme views and social disadvantage are misplaced or simply wrong. From research in areas like public health and health education, we have also learned that attitudes and behaviour are not necessarily related. We also know with some certainty that socially disadvantaged backgrounds do not correlate with engagement in terrorism or political violence. These rather inconvenient facts challenge popular assumptions about radicalisation and behaviour. The religious state currently emerging in Egypt has little if anything to do with the activism and radicalism shown in Tahrir Square.

The wrong approach

However, perhaps we are viewing political violence through the wrong lens. Perhaps rather than focusing on political justification, we should see politically violent behaviour within the broader context of problematic behaviours like those we are familiar with in child protection situations, women’s issues and abuse and, more generally, violent crime. This takes the debate outside of the conventional radicalisation framework and places it within potentially more productive evidence-based analysis. At least within the liberal democracies, if we categorise political violence as we might other forms of problematic behaviour, we might then be led
to explore how preventative measures from other areas might be relevant to our concerns, and how to apply what aetiological knowledge we have to understanding and preventing its occurrence.

In order to do this, we need to have a much more nuanced view of the ‘process’ (or what has been termed the ‘Arc’\(^3\)) of terrorist involvement. We might, in fact, identify six potential stages of terrorist involvement:

a. Pre-radicalisation (a term coined by Silber and Bhatt 2007)\(^4\)

b. Radicalisation

c. Violent radicalisation (or becoming involved in a terrorist movement)

d. Engaging in terrorist acts

e. Disengaging (cessation or directional change of behaviour)

f. De-radicalisation (cessation or directional change of attitudes deemed conducive to – or risk factors for – terrorist behaviour)

Presumably, within each category or element of terrorist engagement we will see different motivating conditions, different environmental shapers of behaviour, and the individual will experience different consequences. Given this more sophisticated and nuanced view we might then structure preventative intervention in ways that address the specific stage and problems of the individual.

Addressing the problems in this way offers an opportunity for systematically exploring the factors related to specific radicalisation situations and also enables, at the least, parallels to be drawn (if not directly comparable strategies) with other areas of intervention. But in doing this, we can identify a number of challenges that need to be resolved:

a. Are we concerned with preventing the occurrence of the problematic behaviour in the first instance, or are we concerned with preventing recidivism (i.e. the expression of further problematic behaviour after or during incarceration)? These imply quite different activities, and address very different things.

b. Related to this, are we primarily concerned with attitudinal or behavioural change? Again, these are not the same things, and they have very different implications for intervention.

c. Are we primarily concerned with risk/harm reduction? If so, how might we characterise this concern? Are we concerned about the:

i. Risk of becoming involved in terrorism?

ii. Risk of facilitating others (as in aiding and abetting; counselling and procuring)?\(^5\)

iii. Transition risk (moving from one state to another as in Taylor and Horgan 2006)?

This latter issue is important, for as noted already, not all roles within terrorist groups are necessarily illegal, or even problematic (other than, presumably, the principled involvement).

A major difficulty in pursuing this enterprise, however, is not only conceptual confusion about what is intended, but also the lack of validated assessment tools to judge outcomes.

a. A fundamental quality of risk assessment tools is their actuarial base – they tend to depend on past performance as a predictor of future outcomes. Whilst the actuarial base to justify such arguments may be sufficiently extensive in areas such as sexual offending, in the case of terrorism there simply isn’t the data to generate viable models.\(^6\) New developments such as the ERG22+ may offer a more structured validated assessment tool, but it is too early to firmly judge its value.\(^7\)

b. Developing further from the above, many of the standard clinical risk reduction tools are premised on concepts not readily transferable to political violence. If we take an example from another area, our response to excessive alcohol consumption for example, are we concerned with total abstinence or controlled drinking? – At the least this implies a more nuanced view of the kinds of people presenting.

c. Sex Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTPs) have invested enormous resources into evidence-based risk management. They tend to focus on issues of ‘insight’ and ‘empathy’ as critical variables in judging outcomes. But these are concepts that don’t readily translate
into a political violence context, and have not received much by way of empirical exploration with this population of offenders.

A way forward?
The following are some thoughts about what we might do to improve matters in terms of managing terrorist offenders.

a. Be clear what population is targeted. In the brief discussion above, it is quite clear that there are a range of different types of involvement in terrorism, which presumably relate to an array of situational and personal contexts. What we know about interventions is that they need to reflect these contexts.

b. Use what we already know; in particular draw on knowledge from public health, advertising and counter-narratives.\(^8\)

c. In the context of prison populations, there is clearly the potential to explore new therapies and interventions further – three potentially useful approaches may be especially suited to the religious context – Mindfulness Therapy/Acceptance and Commitment Therapy/Good Lives Model.\(^9,10,11\)

1. Mindfulness brings together Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Buddhist techniques – the aim of mindfulness is to enhance awareness so clients are able to respond to things instead of react to them. It is very effective in treatment of depression. Whilst of potential relevance in a terrorism context, we lack empirical exploration.

2. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – ACT – uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies mixed in different ways with commitment and behaviour-change strategies, to increase psychological flexibility. It is used in broader array of situations involving problematic behaviour. ACT has a strong empirical base, associated with a strong focus on values.

3. Good Lives Model – This approach regards participants as whole beings in need of focus in many principal life areas (e.g., family, employment, leisure, community, personal well-being).

In developing the above, we need to

a. Creatively explore what these might mean in radicalisation settings

b. Move these kinds of interventions outside of clinical frameworks

c. Systematically and empirically explore process and outcomes.

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3. J. Horgan and M. Taylor, “Disengagement, De-radicalization and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research”, in *jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Surrey: Ashgate 2011). The notion of an Arc refers in this sense to a continuous progression or line of development embracing the process of change from becoming a terrorist, being a terrorist and leaving terrorism.


5. These terms are from Section 8 of the UK Aiders and Abettors Act 1861 and Section 44 of the UK Magistrates Courts Act 1980. This offence can occur both before a crime occurs and at the scene of a crime. Critical evidential issues relate to either prior arrangement or encouragement.


8. For a very valuable discussion of this see “Countering Violent Extremist Narratives”, *National Coordinator for Counterterrorism* (NCTb), The Netherlands, (2010).


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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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