

CHAPTER THREE

DE-HAMASIFICATION AS AN OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK FOR DERADICALIZATION IN THE GAZA STRIP

DERADICALIZATION AND DE-HAMASIFICATION: CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

The literature offers varying definitions of deradicalization. Schmid (2013) defines it as “an ideological distancing from violent extremism, involving a cognitive and emotional disengagement from beliefs that justify violence.” Demant et al. (2008) describe it as “the cessation of violent behavior accompanied by a renewed commitment to democratic values and social integration.” Rabasa et al. (2010) view it as “a process of abandoning extremist worldviews and accepting gradual change within a pluralistic framework.”

It is evident that some of these definitions position a democratic and pluralistic value system as the alternative to extremist beliefs and norms. Given that the Gaza Strip lacks a democratic and pluralistic political legacy, it is more appropriate to articulate a more neutral objective regarding the alternative value framework. Moreover, under Gaza’s unique circumstances—as part of a Palestinian polity still deeply embedded in an intense national conflict with religious and ethnic dimensions—it is not feasible to ignore the need to preserve space for political action and political struggle, even within a deradicalization context.

Accordingly, for the purposes of the present study we adopt the following definition: **Deradicalization is a process through which individuals and societies abandon extremist beliefs and ideologies that justify violence, involving a cognitive and emotional disengagement from extremist worldviews and the adoption of non-violent approaches to pursuing political and ideological objectives.**

It is important to distinguish deradicalization from related concepts:

- Anti-radicalization: A preventive, society-wide process aimed at “immunizing” populations against extremist worldviews before such ideas gain traction.
- Counter-radicalization: Targeted interventions directed at individuals or groups that already display tendencies toward extremism, prior to their transition to violence.
- Disengagement: Behavioral withdrawal from violence without a corresponding change in belief systems.
- Rehabilitation: Psychosocial and vocational assistance that enables a return to civilian life, even in the absence of ideological change.
- DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration): A conflict-resolution strategy focused on dismantling armed forces and reintegrating combatants. In its conventional formulations, DDR seeks to return extremist fighters to a “normal” society. In the Gazan case, however, society as a whole has undergone processes of radicalization and therefore requires broader ideological rehabilitation. Nevertheless, the disarmament of Hamas and other armed groups in the Gaza Strip should be understood as a fundamental security prerequisite for societal deradicalization, and as a vital component of the overall deradicalization process in Gaza.

In this study, we deliberately refrain from using the generic term “deradicalization” and instead adopt the term “de-Hamasification” in order to underscore the unique nature of the challenge in Gaza. The task at hand is the dismantling of a deeply entrenched extremist Islamist order and the erosion of its social legitimacy—without negating the Palestinians’ legitimate national aspirations or their right to pursue those aspirations through non-violent struggle. Rejecting the very right to non-violent national political action would render the de-radicalization effort itself illegitimate and lacking credibility.

THREE LEVELS OF ACTION: MICRO, MESO, AND MACRO

The literature distinguishes between two—and in some cases three—levels of action in de-radicalization processes (Doosje et al., 2016):

- **Micro level:** Psychological and personal processes at the individual level—such as crises, cognitive dissonance, and identity shifts (for example, marriage, parenthood, or trauma)—that can create “cognitive openings” for exiting pathways of extremism.
- **Meso level:** Community-level processes (family, peers, religious figures, social networks, and peer groups). Many of the dynamics of extremist socialization and de-socialization occur at this level.
- **Macro level:** Structural and governance-level processes (institutions of governance, education systems, legal frameworks, the economy, and the broader public sphere). This level defines the background conditions and context, the sources of broad legitimacy, and the range of available ideological alternatives.

The success of deradicalization programs depends on the ability to integrate all three levels, such that individuals can undergo identity change, communities can support the process, and institutions can provide a credible alternative environment.

PUSH AND PULL DYNAMICS

The literature distinguishes between **push factors** and **pull factors** in processes of deradicalization:

- **Push factors** are negative experiences that undermine commitment to extremism, such as corruption, repression, ideological contradictions, and internal fragmentation. They generate disappointment and frustration with extremist organizations. In the Gazan context, Hamas’ military defeat—and the destruction and devastation it has brought upon the Strip and its

population—may serve as a significant push factor, shattering the movement's image of efficacy and its promise of success in the eyes of the public.

- **Pull factors** are alternatives that offer hope and a sense of belonging to positive ideologies and sources of identification, such as reformed education, moderate religious interpretation, political inclusion, and a shared civic identity. In the Gazan context, the establishment of a credible political and economic horizon—through a political process and civilian reconstruction—constitutes a central pull factor.

It is essential to integrate both push and pull factors, as reliance on push efforts alone—forcing individuals out of an extremist framework without a credible alternative—may lead to despair or apathy. Conversely, offering pull factors toward more moderate political and ideological alternatives will be perceived as unconvincing as long as the extremist framework retains its power. **Only when disillusionment with the existing extremist order is combined with the provision of concrete hope does a genuine exit route become possible.**

| | Micro (Individual) | Meso (Community) | Macro (Governance) | Examples |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| Anti-Radicalization (Prevention) | Critical thinking education; rational–emotive skills training (Trip et al., 2019) | Youth mentoring; strengthening pluralistic civil society | Institutional pluralism; equitable service provision; inclusive labor markets; transparent governance | Indonesia after 2005: Pluralistic Islamic education combined with economic growth → decline in support for Jamaah Islamiyah (Fealy & White, 2008) |
| Counter-Radicalization (Targeted Intervention) | Exit programs and counselling; focused psychosocial support | Dialogue with credible intermediaries; countering online extremist content; family support mechanisms | Community policing reforms; credible grievance-redress mechanisms; anti-corruption measures | Germany – Kronos Program: Mentorship by former extremists for at-risk youth → reduced propensity for violence (Bjørge & van Donselaar, 2009; Koehler, 2017) |
| Deradicalization (Rehabilitation and Identity Transformation) | Identity- and belief-oriented therapy; value reframing; trauma processing | Religious re-legitimation by moderate clerics (Wiktorowicz, 2005; Atran & Axelrod, 2008) | Legal and governance reforms; curriculum reform; employment rehabilitation | Egypt, 2007: Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's renunciation of jihadism and provision of a religious framework for abandoning violence (Brachman, 2007) |

CORE MECHANISMS

The central building blocks of deradicalization processes are security, institutional reform, and a counter-narrative. More specifically:

- **Security and military stabilization:** In the Gazan context, this entails the military defeat of Hamas, a process of demilitarization of the Strip, the disarmament of armed groups, and the establishment of robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.
- **Educational reform:** Replacing politicized or factional curricula with pluralistic education, including the teaching of critical thinking and media literacy. However, in the absence of trust in governing authorities, such reforms are likely to be perceived as propaganda rather than genuine transformation (Balla, 2022).
- **Religious re-legitimation:** Promoting moderate religious interpretations through credible religious authorities. In Egypt, this approach also included the public renunciation of terrorism by former jihadist leaders, lending religious legitimacy to the abandonment of violence.
- **Judicial and governance reform:** De-Hamasification will require dismantling Hamas' parallel institutions and rebuilding an independent, transparent judicial system. In Bosnia, efforts to establish such a system encountered significant difficulties due to inconsistency and weak enforcement (Simović & Adžajlić-Dedović, 2023).
- **An alternative horizon—narrative and counter-narrative:** Deradicalization programs cannot rely solely on negating extremist narratives. They must offer a meaningful positive alternative ethos, grounded in local moral values and perspectives, that presents a credible moderate alternative to extremist ideology. In the Gazan and Palestinian context, it is difficult to envision an attractive ethos that is not linked in some form to the demand for national political independence.

- **Socioeconomic incentives and civic–employment integration:** Disarmament and demilitarization are necessary security conditions but are insufficient on their own. Connecting former activists to the labor market, integrating them into community roles, and placing them on pathways toward normative civilian life can reduce the risk of recidivism and a return to cycles of violence.

CONCLUSION

Out of the deradicalization theory and the historical case studies on which it draws, several key insights emerge:

- **Priorities:** Prevention is less costly than intervention, and intervention is less costly than rehabilitation.
- **Respect for local values:** Messaging must resonate with local culture and identity rather than rely on abstract values perceived as foreign.
- **Local leadership partnership:** International experience shows that without cooperation from within the specific society and credible local leaders and influencers, such processes are unlikely to succeed.
- **Institutional pluralism:** A diversity of schools, religious institutions, and welfare providers matters, provided there is effective oversight to ensure they convey appropriate narratives and are not penetrated by extremist messaging.
- **Measurement:** Programs should track attitudinal change, institutional diversification, and reduced rates of recidivism into extremist activity. Multi-source monitoring enables a clearer picture and course correction during implementation.
- **Coalitions:** Success requires coordination across civil society, mental health, technology, and security actors. Fragmented action creates gaps that extremist actors can exploit.