



Book Review

Sarah V. Marsden: *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* (Palgrave Macmillan)

reviewed by Roger P Warren



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This is a review of a book entitled *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* by Dr Sarah V. Marsden. It examines the reintegration and deradicalisation of former prisoners or those considered 'at risk' of involvement in extremism in the UK. The book leverages criminological theory and empirical findings that result in analysis that argues that reintegration is a more appropriate framework than deradicalisation, and proposes mechanisms by which individuals can be supported to move away from extremism. It is unreservedly recommended for both scholars and practitioners.

With the backdrop of the 2011 violent uprisings in Libya and Syria that witnessed the involvement of many Arab and Western foreign fighters, *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* is a particularly timely book that acknowledges the reality of some individuals eventually returning home, and recognises the importance of their reintegration in their country of residence. Dr Sarah V. Marsden, currently a lecturer in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University (UK), has done a magisterial job researching the challenges of such reintegration, and offers a meaningful and practical way forward. Her book is an empirically informed study that relies on several years of research learning from community-based and statutory organisations involved with those considered 'at risk' of involvement in violent extremism, and those who have been convicted for terrorism offences in the UK. This research which leveraged criminological theory, included 33 semi-structured interviews with representatives of community based organisations, the police, local councils, and probation officers.

The three central arguments of the book involve a model by which individuals can be supported to move away from extremism and 'sustain a crime-free life' (p. 32). The first argument is the need to focus on their reintegration and a concomitant move away from the notion of deradicalisation. This entails learning how statutory and community-based organisations can focus on supporting agency and reintegration. The second argument calls for developing resilience to negative peer pressure and the effect of political and social events that may inform the motivation to reoffend. This entails the encouragement of a broader social identity (beyond the group), and the involvement of critical thinking. The final argument suggests the need to redirect the motivation to (re)offend by considering how individuals may be encouraged to pursue primary human goods (including relatedness, spirituality, community and agency). The arguments are persuasive, yet the author correctly caveats the success of such a model citing 'the distrust' between former prisoners and probation officers (p. 90), and the existence of only 'cautious optimism that in some cases practitioners may be able to facilitate a move from extremism' (p. 106).

The book is well crafted and usefully unpacks the deradicalisation construct in a nuanced way. Whilst arguing for the three mechanisms (reintegration, resilience, and redirecting the initial motivation to offend – noted earlier), Dr Marsden demonstrates great perspicacity by adopting a holistic view of former prisoners



or those considered 'at risk' of involvement in extremism, whilst at the same time, stressing the importance of context (p. 9). This is done by adopting a contextualised and individualised approach, shying away from the 'one size fits all' approach, that is often employed in deradicalisation models. The book suggests that the most appropriate coherent model of practice, based on the Good Lives Model (GLM), should focus on personal strengths, the promotion of individual agency, and an ecological approach to the individual. Such a model moves away from the risk-orientated model of deradicalisation, and instead leverages the benefits of a more clearly strengths-based approach. This reintegration model firmly situates former prisoners in their personal, social and political context. This approach notably eschews the attempt to deconstruct 'radical' attitudes or beliefs in the way the deradicalisation construct implies, rather it focusses on the reintegration of individuals back into a specific community setting, and by 'developing a commitment to a different ideological system – or moral community' (p. 80).

The greatest strength of the book lies in its empirical foundation and thorough research – both to the highest academic standards. Whilst drawing on established theory, the book moves beyond the walls of the library, and out into 'the real world' to interview those practitioners on the frontline of reintegrating politically motivated former prisoners and those considered 'at risk' of involvement in extremism – namely representatives of community based organisations, the police, local councils, and probation officers. Additionally, the book also includes recommendations for the reintegration of contemporary foreign fighters, including the need 'that returnees feel they have a home state that is willing and able to facilitate their reintegration back into society' (p. 6) – recommendations that perhaps contentious, have enormous implications for current and future policy and practice.

Whilst there appeared to be no cracks in what was very sound research and analysis, there were three areas that may have benefited from greater explanation. First, as part of the resilience model, Dr Marsden suggests the importance of 'critical thinking ... through education ... in order to develop skills to deepen [probationers'] understanding of politics, religion and ultimately better understand their place in the world' (p. 69). Whilst this may have merit, it is still broadly accepted that many of those involved in politically motivated violent offences, are educated; for example, the 2017 Manchester bomber (Salam Abedi), and the leader of the 7/7 attacks in London (Muhammad Sadiq Khan), were both university educated. This suggests that practitioners will also need to be equipped with the required political-religious knowledge, and perhaps the implicit requirement to have special educators who are not only qualified to offer such an education, but also (for some) to have credibility (in the eyes of the probationers) – for example perhaps former Islamist activists such as Ed Hussain and Maajid Nawaz. Second, there appeared a counter-argument to the notion that some former prisoners may have a 'stigma associated with the offence' (p. 117). It is perhaps equally likely that former prisoners may also enjoy a certain kudos, influence, and notoriety that may sustain the notion of charismatic authority – as displayed by former prisoners and detainees from the Northern Ireland Maze prison and the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Finally, there were a few loose terms, for example 'global jihadist ideology' (p. 67), that would have benefited from a clear definition.

In conclusion, *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* is an excellent book – thoroughly researched and analysed, and one that makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates amongst policy makers, practitioners, and academics. It is a topical issue for governments around the world, in particular with the possibility of increased numbers of returning foreign fighters (from Syria and Iraq). Dr Marsden's argument is both compelling and persuasive, and her book should be used as a springboard for greater debate amongst those most involved in the reintegration and deradicalisation of former prisoners, or those considered 'at risk' of involvement in extremism.



***About the Reviewer: Roger P. Warren** was educated at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the University of St Andrews, the author's background is based on thirty years of British military experience much of it in the Arab world. Research interests include: Arab foreign fighters and their nexus to involvement in Islamist terrorism, defensive jihad, radicalisation (in its broadest form), the impact of combat on foreign fighters (indoctrination, the Lucifer Effect, obedience to authority), de-radicalisation / reintegration / rehabilitation strategies, political Islam and 'suicide' terrorism and 'martyrdom' operations. He was awarded his PhD (that studied Arab foreign fighters) in 2017.*