



20 Working on Conflict Dynamics: Escalation and Radicalisation

Basma Abdelaziz, Karin Göldner-Ebenthal, Lara Azzam and Cassandra Schützko

“Conflict is a necessity for communities when there are diverging purposes.”

Ibn Khaldun

If we look at conflicts closely, different dynamics, layers, purposes, stakeholders and interests become visible. In-depth conflict analysis is indispensable for understanding the dynamics between conflict actors and engaging them in conflict transformation. As a USAID conflict assessment framework points out,

CONFLICT | a perceived incompatibility of interests, needs and wants between individuals or groups. Conflict transformation regards conflict as a necessary part of (social) change processes, yet upholds that the means of waging conflict can and should be non-violent means.

ESCALATION | a process of conflict intensification usually referring to a social setting. If left unchecked, it may lead to mutually destructive or violent behaviour. Accordingly, de-escalation is a process of conflict mitigation usually referring to a social setting. Importantly, conflict transformation regards de-escalation as possible in all settings. However, de-escalation rarely just mirrors escalation in return, as loss of trust often needs careful repairing.

RADICALISATION | a process of adopting ideologies set apart from mainstream thinking, sometimes going to the roots or perceived pure understandings of religion or politics. Often referring to individuals. Importantly, conflict transformation acknowledges that radicalism is not necessarily violent or bad. De-radicalisation is a process of bringing individuals and sometimes groups back to a more mainstream thinking and ideology.

“armed conflict is driven by key actors in society – individuals, but also organisational actors of all sorts – who actively mobilize people and resources to engage in acts of violence on the basis of grievance, such as a group’s perception that it has been excluded from political and economic life. Key mobilisers may have different means and incentives that affect the methods they employ to achieve their objectives; violence is only one tactic among many.”
(See also → Addressing Social Grievances.)

Escalation and radicalisation in conflict

The dynamics of actors confronting each other in (protracted) conflict are usually described as steps towards escalation. In recent

debates on violent extremism, the term radicalisation has also gained prominence. These two terms have different meanings, although they are used interchangeably at times, as no commonly accepted definitions exist.

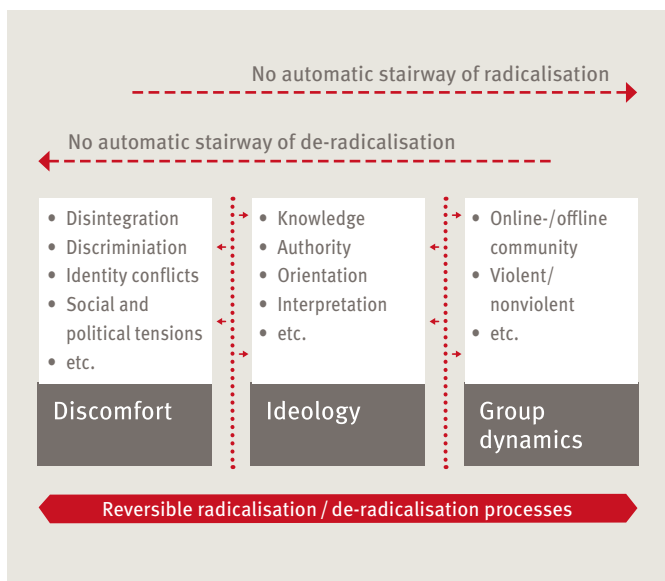
Escalation, as understood by Friedrich Glasl (1999), focuses on the dynamics of groups or individuals in a conflict setting (see Table 4 below). Understanding its stages is key to figuring out the appropriate time and style of intervention to halt the worsening of a conflict. *Radicalisation* is most often understood as an intra-personal and highly individual process. As such, although by no means independent of context, it is not necessarily related to a conflict setting. A large set of push and pull factors have been identified that influence each person individually and can – but do not have to! – lead to radicalisation.

It is important to stress this: radicalisation and escalation can lead to violence but there is no automatic “stairway”. Rather, escalation and radicalisation are processes that can stop and stabilise at any level and point in time or even reverse into de-escalation and de-radicalisation. In current debates around violent extremism, radicalisation is often used in reference to violence but there is no constitutive link between the two (cf. figure 11).

The central role of education

Approaches to influence these dynamics focus either on preventing escalation or radicalisation from starting or intensifying, or on supporting de-escalation and de-radicalisation after they have happened. The two approaches are not clear-cut. Significant overlap exists in the work of conflict de-escalation/de-radicalisation and violence prevention. Both approaches use dialogue-based methods that aim to address the existing or potential root causes of a conflict or a radicalisation process. Understanding the feelings and motives of actors leading to a particular (violent) action or behaviour is at the core of both approaches.

Radicalisation processes



Graph by: Christoph Lang

Figure 11, based on P. Neumann

Interventions can address individuals directly or indirectly via their communities and institutions. They can also work simultaneously on the individual and community or institutional level. In the Berghof Foundation's experience, this is the most effective way. Some institutions, for instance religious institutions, have a mandate over individuals' de-radicalisation, such as returned foreign fighters, as well as over their constituency as a whole. Understanding the (conflict) context, the conflictual issue and relevant actors is therefore essential for any attempt to influence actor dynamics and achieve conflict transformation.

One of the main avenues in the long-term prevention of radicalisation and violent escalation is quality education. For example, education plays a crucial role in strengthening young people's resilience by enhancing skills such as reflective and critical thinking, communication, and the ability to adopt different perspectives. These skills help young people to better understand and evaluate complex situations, including conflicts. They also support the identification of better and workable solutions. The specific field of peace education is critical to our work and aims to strengthen people's capacities to deal constructively with various types of conflict. It does so by developing a comprehensive programme that teaches people how to interact with others and avoid unnecessary aggression (see also → Empowerment and Ownership).

Challenges and lessons learned in de-radicalisation and de-escalation

Supporting or starting de-radicalisation and de-escalation processes encounters several hurdles. One of them is often intense in-group/out-group perceptions that limit access to the group (or individual) and hence the scope to start any kind of dialogue. Individuals are often radicalised by peer-to-peer influence and motivated by group belonging; this may disconnect them from mainstream institutions and official groups, often also as a result of perceived marginalisation and oppression, and makes them difficult to reach.

De-radicalisation efforts for individuals may take the form of exit strategies that encourage radicalised individuals to leave a group, or may involve working with those individuals once they have been removed from their group. The latter often happens in programmes conducted in prisons, for example, where access is possible. Indirect approaches to de-radicalisation via communities and institutions include supporting capacity- and strategy-building to either change the context and reduce possible push and pull factors' impact or to weaken narratives that are typical of radicalisation processes, such as victimisation narratives.

The Nine Levels of Conflict Escalation by Friedrich Glasl




<p>1. Concretisation</p>	<p>The points of view become more rigid and clash with each other. However, there is still a belief that conflict can be resolved through discussion. No intransigent parties or positions yet.</p>
	
<p>2. Debate</p>	<p>Polarisation in thinking, emotion and desire: Black-and-white thinking, perspectives from positions of perceived superiority/inferiority.</p>
	
<p>3. Deeds</p>	<p>“Talking is useless”. Strategy of confronting each other with “faits accomplis”. Loss of empathy and danger of misinterpretation.</p>
	
<p>4. Images, Coalitions</p>	<p>The different parties manoeuvre each other into negative roles and engage in open warfare. They recruit supporters.</p>

Table 4, source: Berghof Foundation

In addition, a degree of context-sensitivity and adaptation are necessary. A “one size fits all approach” can do more harm than good, perhaps by not using language sensitively and by stereotypical targeting of communities, which can create resentment, for example when Muslim communities are broadly



targeted for de-radicalisation projects. One solution to this is to work with civil society actors who have insights into the local context.

De-escalation efforts that address groups vary depending on the level of escalation in relation to the use of violence and the general conflict context. Security and military-based strategies are often used in “countering violent extremism”. However, if the context allows and there is a window of opportunity, engaging a non-state armed actor in dialogue for de-escalation can be much more effective. This, however, depends much on the actor itself. Véronique Dudouet has identified factors that facilitate or constrain dialogue with non-state or proscribed armed groups. Her study highlights a combination of factors that need to align, such as leadership, organisational structure and social legitimacy.

While most attention is on groups that have escalated to the level of using violence, de-escalation efforts can and ideally should start before the outbreak of violence. Here again, the role of relevant communities, of respected traditional or religious leaders, the business community but also of youth and women should be considered. They may well have the access, resources and trust required for creating space to engage groups in dialogue. Once this space is established, a de-escalation process can start to address the means by which the conflict is conducted – i. e. ending violence through a ceasefire agreement – as well as addressing the core conflict issues (see → Mediation and Mediation Support and → Facilitating Negotiation and Dialogue). Inclusivity (and participation) are crucial in de-escalation (as well as in de-radicalisation and prevention). They can help to avoid (re-) escalation by supporting legitimacy in a locally driven process, for example in National Dialogue processes.

A way forward ...

Robert Frost, the poet, once wrote, “More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts.” For dialogue, mediation and conflict transformation practitioners, it is crucial to acknowledge that anyone may be susceptible to radicalisation and violence in today’s world, and hence to refrain from stigma-

tisation and overgeneralisation, while having a broad and alert approach to the dynamics and the ever-changing setting of the conflict. At the Berghof Foundation, we therefore engage in research that focuses on areas less well understood: the patterns of resilience and vulnerability in communities, or the dynamics within groups that either mobilise towards violence or incentivise non-violence. With this approach, we aim to promote a holistic approach that is inclusive and constructive in nature.

References and Further Reading

- Véronique Dudouet (2010).** *Mediating Peace with Proscribed Armed Groups*. USIP Special Report 239. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Jennifer Philippa Eggert (2018).** *The Roles of Women in Counter-Radicalisation and Disengagement (CRaD) Processes: Best Practices and Lessons Learned from Europe and the Arab World*. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Friedrich Glasl (1999).** *Confronting Conflict: A First-Aid Kit for Handling Conflict*. Stroud: Hawthorn Press.
- USAID (2012).** *Conflict Assessment Framework Version 2.0*. Washington, DC.

Online Resources

- Mohammed Abu Nimer (2018).** *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding*. In: *Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism*. Edited by Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann. Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13. https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Dialogue_Chapters/dialogue13_Abu-Nimer_lead.pdf
- Preventing Violent Extremism.** *An introduction to education and preventing violent extremism*. INEE Thematic Paper September 2017. http://s3.amazonaws.com/inee-assets/resources/INEE_ThematicPaper_PVE_EN.pdf
- Peter R. Neumann (2017).** *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region*. Vienna: OSCE. <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/346841?download=true>
- Ufuq (2018).** *Empowering Refugees! Prevention of Religious Extremism through Social and Educational Work with Refugees*. Berlin: ufuq e.V. http://www.ufuq.de/ufuq_Empowering_Refugees_Online.pdf
- UNDP (2017).** *Journey to Extremism in Africa*. <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>