Interview - Omar Ashour

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Dr. Omar Ashour is a Senior Lecturer in Security Studies and Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter. He is the Director of the Doctoral Programme at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies and the author of The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements, the first book on transitions from armed to unarmed activism by several Islamists organisations in the Middle East and North Arica. His forthcoming book focuses on how the Islamic State (IS) Organization militarily endured and expanded. Dr. Ashour specialises in asymmetric armed conflict (with a focus on guerrilla warfare strategies), Islamist movements, insurgency/counterinsurgency, terrorism studies, and democratisation (with a main focus on civil-military relations and security sector reform). He previously served as a senior consultant for the United Nations on security sector reform, counter-terrorism, and de- radicalisation issues (2009-2012). He was also a Research Fellow in the Brookings Institution (2010-2015) and Chatham House (2015-2017). He is a regular contributor to media outlets including the BBC, al-Jazeera, Sky News, CNN and others. His op-eds were published in Foreign Policy, The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Independent, al-Jazeera.net, CNN.com, Project Syndicate and other media outlets in 12 languages, in over 60 countries.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

At the moment we are seeing different issue-areas emerging, but most are related to pre-existing sub-fields. In security and military studies, for example, there are new-old debates about how the weaker, non-state side in an armed conflict sometimes manages to pull off an upset. New approaches and explanations are needed because non-state actors are using innovative military methods. Another instance is the long-standing debate about the influence of geography and popular support on insurgencies, but now there are other factors to consider such as technological advancements and the lack of monopoly over the capacities to use violence by state forces. I am trying to address these issues in my forthcoming book on how ISIS fight.

In the area of radicalisation and de-radicalisation the debate is also unfinished, primarily over definitions and causal inferences. The debate continues on what actually constitutes radicalisation and de-radicalisation, the processes that encourage one or the other, and the range of factors that decisively influence these processes, and how to measure success. Most of what is happening in my field is enhancing the conclusions of previous research. We are still struggling with similar questions that earlier generations of scholars dealt with half a century ago, honing our answers to them, and attempting to produce more solid patterns.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Recently, two developments have influenced my thinking. One is the ‘Arab Spring’, which I prefer to call the Arab-majority uprisings, because it was not only Arabs who participated and ‘uprisings’ is a more generic term to describe the different pro-change dynamics that took place. It made me revisit quite a few issues that I was interested in, particularly the sub-field of civil resistance and how it impacts upon political transitions and sociopolitical developments.

Civil-military relations and issues surrounding security sector reform can also be revisited in light of the uprisings. I

had worked on this before and one of my conclusions was that for successful de-radicalisation to happen and to be sustained you need a very thorough process of security sector reform and quite balanced civil-military relations. The Arab-majority uprisings between 2011 and 2013 tested my conclusions and, to a certain degree, were proved correct. There was no successful security sector reform process, no sustained transitional justice process, and no rebalancing of civil-military relations in the MENA region and hence the transitions largely failed and arms became a very critical means for maintaining political survival or for gaining political power. The events were a vindication of these conclusions. The behaviour of some of the challenged regimes, like Qaddafi's in Libya and Assad's in Syria, also served armed non-state actors because it demonstrated that without arms there is no effective way to challenge the likes of Assad and Qaddafi. ISIS capitalised on that and took political violence to extreme ends committing mass murder and using borderline genocidal tactics.

The other development is the emergence of ISIS, which has also made me rethink approaches to insurgency and counter insurgency. ISIS had pulled military upsets that were unimaginable in many ways, while being constantly outnumbered and outgunned. There are a few similar cases but not many, perhaps the Cuban Revolution in 1959, during which, hundreds of guerrillas defeated the US-backed Batista and his army of 40,000. Also, perhaps the Chechen case. In 1996 Grozny was recaptured by fewer than 3,000 Chechen fighters who took around 10,000 Russian soldiers as prisoners of war. In terms of purely military upsets, and away from the ideology, ISIS certainly fit within these rare cases. However, the emergence of ISIS has made me think about how a side that is quite evil, which has little popular support, and only very limited numbers and resources compared to much superior enemies, both state and non-state, has managed to survive as long as they have. The group has certainly expanded by military means, as their motto says "endure and expand." Most of these developments have made me rethink quite a few scholarly conclusions in the insurgency/counterinsurgency subfields.

What is meant by de-radicalisation?

First, in a very simple way, devoid of any ideological, political or regional context, a radical is someone who wants very sweeping revolutionary socio-political and socio-economic changes. These changes should be very deep rooted and are to happen rapidly. As a result, a radical needs to deny or marginalise the other as there is no time for debate or compromise. Usually the status quo will fight back and radicals may need to use violence to beat it. Although these demands can be made without the use of violence, they are usually so high-end that the status quo will crack down on the radicals. The demands are not necessarily bad or evil. Democracy, women's rights and human equality were all radical demands at one point in time. A de-radicalised person is the exact opposite, after they have held radical beliefs and demands, perhaps within an organisation, then they retreat from demanding sweeping changes and instead demanding gradualist changes, they retreat from the idea of using violence and maintain that non-violence is an ethical, effective and legitimate tactic, and violence is not. De-radicalisation also brings an end to denying the other to have a different point of view, and allowing debate without marginalisation.

Within the "Islamist de-radicalisation" literature – and this is quite unique for Islamist ideologies – there has been a mix up between de-radicalisation and co-optation. It seems that if a person or group is considered to be part of the status quo then they are de-radicalised, regardless of what the status quo is. For example, the de-radicalisation programme in Saudi Arabia deems someone de-radicalised if they accept the King as the only legitimate political authority. That means that even if you previously opposed the practice of cutting off hands but then agree with the King you are deemed a moderate. So de-radicalisation has become associated with the status quo and conforming to it regardless of how radical, moderate, or repressive the status quo is.

My focus within the concept of de-radicalisation was primarily the transition away from armed or violent activism. However, I think that this has been conflated with the idea that de-radicalised individuals or organisations accept liberal democracy and moderation, so if you are still illiberal then you are not de-radicalised. This makes it very easy to negatively dismiss any figure or organisation that is illiberal and consider them radicals, even if they do not want to overturn a liberal status-quo. If de-radicalisation was defined as the acceptance of liberal democracy or the status quo then many of the groups that have turned away from violence and, for example, formed political party opposition, are deemed radicals. Some take it even further and deem them terrorists. It becomes a game in which a government that wants to delegitimate someone can give them this title, or if they want to legitimate them they will take away the

title.

I argue that you can retreat from the use of violence but still be illiberal and not uphold constitutional liberalism. You can still uphold misogynistic, homophobic or xenophobic views but you have just stopped using violence to implement those views. My work has mainly been about transitions away from violence and armed activism. I have been put off calling this de-radicalisation because the debate is too heated and the term was used in so many ways that it became too vague to mean anything. It can mean you are upholding the status quo, that you have been co-opted by an authoritarian regime, that you are a moderate or that you are not a moderate. There is an on-going debate in the literature, which has not been settled and I don't think it will be.

In your book De-Radicalization of Jihadists **you analysed the de-radicalisation processes of a range of once armed Islamist movements. What were the common features required for successful de-radicalisation to take place in these cases?**

There are quite a few commonalities between the cases. Most transitions away from violence involve three dimensions: behavioural, ideological, and organisational. In most cases one of these dimensions are involved, and in some cases, all three.

Usually the behavioural dimension involves the leadership deciding to cease the use of violence. It may take this further by issuing an ideological frame for justifying the cessation of violence, which usually has a lasting impact because it takes away the legitimacy for the use of violence. If the group uses religious narratives to justify its objectives and strategies then it will use them again to de-justify the use of armed tactics. We saw this in the case of the former Jihadist and armed Islamist groups that I talked about in the book. This has also been seen with other types of groups such as armed Marxists-Leninist and ethno-nationalist groups. There is also an organisational element which requires the dismantling of the organisation's capacity to take up arms, such as an armed wing, weapons warehouses, and/or training camps. The three dimensions have been consistently observed in cases from Latin America to South-East Asia.

There are also four major factors that appear in every case of collective transition from armed activism to unarmed activism: leadership, crisis, interaction with the non-like minded, and inducements.

– Leadership is usually important, regardless of the type of organisation we are talking about. If the charismatic leader or the most senior leadership entity is in favour of the transition then the process is more likely to succeed than if the group was decapitated with no leadership, or if the leadership entity is divided.

– Transitions away from violence often happen when the organisation is in crisis. For instance, when both the organisation and its opposition are hurting but neither side is capable of decisively winning or if one side is losing, or think that they are losing. In the case of the FARC, they weren't actually losing militarily but the government were more open to negotiate because the government also thought they were losing. Other cases from Latin America also demonstrate this, such as the Chilean case specifically after the Pinochet coup in 1973, the case of the Tupamaros in Uruguay after their leaders were put in prison, the Brazilian cases of armed communist and left wing organisations in the early 1970s. Most of these cases involved military defeats to a certain degree and then the transition began. There are similar cases in the Far and Middle East as well, in which groups were either completely or partly defeated and then started the transition afterwards, primarily in prison but sometimes in the mountains or in exile.

– Another critical factor across groups is interaction with the non-like minded. When a group is in a crisis situation and interacts with a non-like minded figure or organisation then the group updates its worldview. This interaction can diminish ideological red lines within the group. If taking up arms is part of the group's dogma but it is in crisis and interacts with a non-like minded organisation, such as a civil society organisation or a political party, the group implements an alternative and perhaps pursues change without using arms. This is particularly likely if the interaction is with a successful political party or a social movement, which makes it a more convincing case.

– Finally, all cases have inducements, which need to be presented as a package that encourages transitions away

from violence. This could range from enhancing prison conditions to a power sharing role in the government. It could consist of an agreement that violence will stop or that arms will be put aside from politics. This happened with the FARC in 2016 and in Tajikistan in 1997 when a peace deal was brokered that included the opposition getting a 30% quota in the government and parliament, and all the combatants were taken into the security and army forces. In Egypt, the Islamic Group (Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya) got enhanced prison conditions and pensions for the members of the armed wing, which was more of a socio-economic deal. The group could not become a political party under Mubarak but it did after he was toppled in 2011, and won 13 seats in the 2012 election, but things obviously changed again in 2013. The inducements are very difficult to negotiate. From a victim's perspective, the perpetrators of violence – whether status-quo or non-status-quo – are being rewarded, not punished. This partly explains the results of the Colombian referendum in October 2016, the successive failures of peace negotiations with the PKK in Turkey, and the relative unpopularity of the Russo-Chechen Peace Agreement of May 1997 among Russian voters.

What are policy-makers in Western states and the MENA region doing to address the issue of de-radicalisation?

First, you have to distinguish between the transitions that occur on a collective level and those on a factional or individual level. Most of the policies and programmes in Western states are designed to influence individuals, such as the Channel process and Prevent policy in the UK, which is mostly about identifying people potentially vulnerable to extremism and trying to counter that at an early stage. Many of the programmes, such as the one in Saudi Arabia, which is the largest and probably the wealthiest programme any state has had, is directed at individuals, not organisations or leadership. These programmes are focused on individuals and try to influence them using a theological, ideological, psychological, social, economic and security packages. Every programme needs to be designed in a different way and you need to know what you're doing. If you're targeting a collectivity and aiming to transform a group then the strategy needs to be very different from individuals. When targeting individuals you don't have the organisational leadership that you need to convince and to give orders to their followers. You will primarily deal with a mixture of spiritual leaders and role models that the individual will look up to.

In terms of collective programmes, government leadership needs to be quite dynamic and flexible in their ideas about having the upper hand militarily and the package of selective inducements. If it is a democracy they need to be able to do it without losing elections or without voting the transition deal down as in the Colombian case. If it is an authoritarian system then they need to manage their coalition of power as disgruntled security officials or victims of the group may want to veto the process in one way or another. It is possible that those within the system had relatives or colleagues who were killed by the organisation in question.

The attempted transition of the PKK in Turkey failed, despite having very charismatic leaders on both sides, partly because of the aforementioned factors. The case of ETA in Spain was a classic case of factional de-radicalisation, which involved faction after faction turning away from political violence and resulted in some forming or joining a party. It is now a very different organisation to the one it was in the 1970s. It has very different factions with some upholding institutional politics and rejecting violence, and others the opposite, so they didn't have a lot of sway over the transition.

In some cases, the transformations suffer from spoilers. In Algeria, the transition process of some groups saw spoiler tactics going on all over. While negotiations were going on between the leadership of the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and the leadership of the Algerian Military Intelligence (DRS), a faction from the army killed a few of the AIS leader's relatives to spoil the talks and force them to react. It did not work. But sometimes dirty tactics make their way in these transitions and spoil them.

In relation to de-radicalisation, what lessons can be learnt from some of the partial democratic transitions that took place after the 2011 uprisings?

One of the ramifications of the failure of the transitions in the Arab-majority uprisings was ISIS. In some cases, the ones who abandoned armed activism neither got institutional legitimacy nor secured survival. ISIS can point at these failures and say, that their model is much better and that when you die for your cause with them, you die with a gun in

your hand in an honourable way rather than rotting in prison. The failure of these transitions, the partial failure of de-radicalisation and democratisation in most of the region has helped ISIS to create a narrative which is convincing for a segment of the youth of the region. And if ISIS collapses tomorrow, that brutal regional environment is capable of breeding more ISIS-like organisations.

What is the potential for de-radicalisation in relation to ISIS? Are Western strategies to counter ISIS positively contributing to this?

It is very difficult. Some of the necessary factors are not present in the case of ISIS, including but not limited to a leadership that wants to transform. Also, ISIS is operating in an environment that does not reward de-radicalisation and moderation and does not encourage compromise and de-escalation. The question that gets raised mockingly within many of the armed organisations in the region is "who would you rather surrender your arms to, the Assads or the Sisis of the region?!" In other words, the Lincolns and the Mandelas are either non-existent, or not powerful enough in a regional context.

As for Western strategies, they are effective on the short-to-midterm – depending on the context. Many Western decision-makers today do acknowledge that ISIS is a symptom, not a cause, of the dysfunctional politics in the region. Hence, any long-term solution must include reforming the political environment that consistently engendered violent radicalisation for more than four decades. So, a military defeat would only temporarily mask the deep structural problems behind the emergence of the organisation and its kind, not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Hence, the military defeat of ISIS would be the equivalent of putting a strong bandage on a festering wound. The real challenge for the West is to sustain political reforms and national reconciliation processes during and in the aftermath of military campaigns. I really do not envy our decision-makers, but I try to do my best to help.

Last year you wrote a report **on Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt. How have these relations changed since the ousting of President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013? Are you optimistic about future relations between Islamists and the military in Egypt?**

Not really. The situation in Egypt has deteriorated significantly since the military coup of July 2013. The country witnessed unprecedented levels of corruption and repression, even compared to the darkest days of Mubarak and Nasser. It is a very sad and complex saga of high expectations and low, bloody results. Eventually, some sort of a compromise and an unfair reconciliation are necessary in the end. But I don't think the current military rulers in Egypt are interested in it. And certainly, the amount of bloodshed that occurred in the last three years have undermined all reconciliatory initiatives, including Western-led and Western-sponsored ones.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Security Studies and Middle Eastern and international politics?

Scholars of security studies are correctly criticised for using terms and analyses that are too "statist" or "state-oriented." So for young scholars, change that. I think this will provide better answers for both academia and policy.

For scholars of Middle Eastern Politics, just don't give up on the region! Most of us did not predict the Arab-majority uprising because we dealt with the region as an "end of history" – with stable authoritarians being the victorious side. For younger scholars, don't repeat that mistake.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Editor-at-large for E-IR.