

Disengagement from Extremist Groups: Processes and Programmes

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My own involvement in the issue of disengagement from violent extremism

- ▼ Mid-1990s: Doctoral thesis on *Racist and Right-wing Violence in Scandinavia*.
 - ▼ Why do young people join racist groups - and what happens when they want to leave?
- ▼ Spin-off: The Exit Programme to facilitate disengagement from racist groups
- ▼ 2003: John Horgan and I decide to start joint book project on disengagement from terrorism; international team of 12 co-authors
- ▼ 2008: Publication of Bjørge & Horgan: *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge)



New approaches in counter-terrorism

- ▼ Reducing recruitment to terrorism by preventing violent *radicalisation*
- ▼ Making terrorists quit: "*deradicalisation*"
- ▼ Conceptual lack of clarity in the new discourse on radicalisation/deradicalisation

The complex relations between radical values and radical behaviour

- ▼ Individuals do not necessarily join extremist groups because they hold extremist views; they sometimes acquire extremist views because they have joined such a group for other reasons
- ▼ Some individuals dispose of their radical views as a consequence of having left an extremist group rather than as a cause for leaving the group
- ▼ Others distance themselves from the group and its violent means, but retain their radical views on society.

Deradicalisation vs. disengagement

- ▼ *Counter-radicalisation* is to prevent radicalisation from taking place
- ▼ *De-radicalisation* is a change in values and ideas away from embracing radical and/or violent policies
- ▼ *Disengagement* is a change in behaviour by breaking off participation in violent groups or engagement in political violence
- ▼ Values may or may not change when individuals disengage from violent activism
- ▼ Some disengage without deradicalising
- ▼ Some reengage after having disengaged
- ▼ Others move into other roles within the militant movement

Individual disengagement from terrorism

- ▼ How do individuals disengage?
 - ▼ Disengagement can be
 - ▼ voluntary
 - ▼ involuntary
 - ▼ or a combination

Push factors for individual disengagement

- ▼ Disillusionment with the (unattainable) goals of the group
- ▼ Disillusionment with the violent methods and who are victimised by the group
- ▼ Disillusioned with the leaders of the group
- ▼ Disillusionment with the social relations within the group
- ▼ Loss of position and status within the group
- ▼ Cannot take the pressure any more; burn-out
- ▼ Competing loyalties between group and family obligations

Pull factors for individual disengagement

- ▼ Availability of an exit from underground life
- ▼ Amnesty or reduced sentencing for crimes committed
- ▼ Education and job training
- ▼ Economic support
- ▼ New social networks
- ▼ Establishing a family
- ▼ Longing for a peaceful and ordinary life without the stress and pressure of illegal activism

Collective disengagement: How terrorist groups and campaigns come to an end

- ▼ Defeat by repression
 - ▼ The capture or killing of the leader
 - ▼ The capture and imprisonment of (core) members
- ▼ Failure by disintegration
 - ▼ Disillusionment among members about
 - ▼ inability to achieve the groups' goals
 - ▼ violent methods and who are victimised
 - ▼ leadership and social relations within the group
 - ▼ Loss of public support
 - ▼ Failure to transition to the next generation
 - ▼ Closing down / disbanding group, or surrender to authorities

Collective disengagement: How terrorist groups and campaigns come to an end (... continued)

- ▼ Transition to a legitimate political process, often involving
 - ▼ Negotiations with governments
 - ▼ Readjustment of goals and ideology
 - ▼ Disarmament and abandoning violent methods
 - ▼ Amnesty or reduced sentencing, sometimes involving restorative justice
- ▼ End by victory
 - ▼ Achievement of the group's aims
 - ▼ Coming to power

Facilitating disengagement for individual dropouts - European experiences:

- ▼ The "pentiti" system in Italy during 1980s targeting left-wing terrorists (success)
- ▼ The "reinsertion" policy directed towards ETA members willing to abandon terrorism (late 1980s, mixed results)
- ▼ Exit programmes for participants in right-wing extremist groups
 - ▼ Exit in Norway (1997-2001)
 - ▼ Exit in Sweden (1998 -)
 - ▼ Exit Germany (NGO from 2000-ca 2008)
 - ▼ *Aussteiger*-programmes (governmental, from ca 2000 -)
 - ▼ Exit projects in the Netherlands (Winschoten and Eindhoven, 2007-8)

Facilitating disengagement for individual dropouts - experiences from the Muslim world:

- ▼ The Committee for Dialogue in Yemen
- ▼ The Saudi Counselling programme to re-educate and rehabilitate Jihadi activists
- ▼ Rehabilitation of *Jemaah Islamiyya* detainees in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore
- ▼ Collective renunciation of violence by The *Gama'a al-Islamiyyah* and *Jihad* in Egypt (initiated by the leaders, facilitated by government)
- ▼ Collective amnesty offered Jihadi terrorists as part of the national reconciliation programme in Algeria (2005-)
- ▼ And others...

Challenges in promoting disengagement in counter-terrorism

- No magic bullet: Promoting individual and collective disengagement from terrorism can only be *one* element within a comprehensive policy against terrorism
- Risk of recidivism back into terrorism or other forms of crime. This risk can be reduced by
 - screening out insincere participants through a selection process
 - influencing their values and behaviour
 - monitoring ex-militants after their release, with severe sanctions for breaching conditions
 - providing the necessary skills, resources and social networks to enable them to re-integrate into society
- Amnesty to terrorists may mean that those having caused death and suffering sometimes get away with their crimes unpunished, causing more pain to victims and their families

Why should facilitating disengagement be a main element in counter-terrorism policies?

- Individual and collective disengagement from terrorism may reduce the economic and social costs of terrorism
- Promoting collective disengagement from terrorism may end terrorist campaigns
- Disrupting the process of violent radicalization early in a career is better than waiting until violence is committed
- Individual disengagement may reduce the number of active terrorists and the size of terrorist groups.
- Defectors from terrorist groups may serve as credible opinion builders against terrorism
- Defectors from terrorist groups may provide valuable intelligence and testify in court against other terrorists
- With no exit option but death or life in prison, terrorists may continue even if they realise that their struggle is lost