

Excerpt from: Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen. 2013. “Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36:3, 99-115

Research into Disengagement

The past decade has seen a substantial amount of research interest directed towards the topic of radicalization.¹ The other side of the issue – the question of why individuals exit from extremist groups – is less well explored.² Yet, a number of case studies on disengagement have begun to emerge. Some studies focus on the group level – the processes by which whole terrorist groups stop using violence – others focus on the individual level – on how and why individuals exit from terrorism. As the focus of this article is to glean insights of relevance to exit interventions targeting individual extremists, the review concentrates on the latter category.³ A number of authors distinguish between involuntary and voluntary disengagement. Involuntary disengagement might result from the death or imprisonment of a terrorist or by his or her expulsion from the terrorist group. Voluntary disengagement, on the other hand, entails that an individual out of his or her own volition has turned away from terrorism.⁴ The reasons why this happens are, obviously, of particular interest when looking for themes and approaches that might be utilized by external actors in an attempt to promote and facilitate exit from violent extremism. This review therefore concentrates on scientific studies of voluntary disengagement from violent extremism. It focuses on studies based fully or partially on primary sources such as interviews with former extremists. Such sources are likely to offer the best and sometimes only window into what induces a person to leave extremism behind - the subjective interpretation of the situation including the pros and cons of staying or leaving. The review covers only studies of disengagement in a Western context. Not because

insights from case studies from other parts of the world might not be transferable, but because transferability should be tested, not assumed, and such a test lies beyond the scope of this article.

A literature review and a search of the leading terrorism research journals reveals a total of 16 articles and books published since the year 1990. Also included in this review is one dvd with a number of interviews with former members of the militant leftwing group “The Weatherman.”⁵ The studies are based on a total of 216 interviews, supplemented with a number of secondary sources. The interviews are distributed over different forms of extremism as shown in the table below. Taken together the case studies span members of highly violent groups like al-Qaida inspired groups and the German RAF, as well as occasionally violent youth groups like a range of Nordic right wing extremist groups.

| Militant Islamism | Left wing extremism | Right wing extremism | Nationalist/separatist terrorism | Other/type of extremism unclear |
|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 12 | 24 | 107 | 42 | 31 |

Table 1: Total number of primary interviews informing case studies on voluntary exit and disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context. Review of published studies in the period January 1990 to April 2012.

The interviewees – the exiters – comprise both leaders, foot soldiers, long time members and relative newcomers, operatives and ideologues, militants involved in serious violent crimes and militants with a more marginal role. When taken together, the case studies thus indicate variation

rather than any specific profile in terms of which individuals experience doubt and eventually decide to leave extremism behind.

The data has clear limitations. We are not looking at a random and hardly at a representative sample of voluntary disengagers. The interviewees have not been asked the same questions and the data has been processed and analyzed differently. We also lack a control group of “stayers” in order to establish with a higher degree of certainty, that the themes identified below are actually causally linked to disengagement and not simply co-existing.

Yet, what is striking and what makes the stocktaking worthwhile is that the case studies by and large indicate the same three clusters of doubts, and that these doubts seem to be at work across different forms of extremism and extremists: Some individuals apparently exit because of doubts related to the militant ideology, some exit because of doubts triggered by group or leadership failure, and some apparently leave because of doubts triggered by personal and practical circumstances that raise the costs of a militant life style.⁶ It is not possible to assign the individual interviewees to specific clusters and thus establish a quantitative overview over how many disengages from which kind of extremist group in connection with which kind of doubt. Frequently the necessary level of detail about the individual interviewee is lacking. Also, in many cases more sources of doubt appear to be at work simultaneously. But all in all, the three clusters described below arguably provide the best available research based pointers as to which themes and topics could be leveraged in an effort to promote exit from violent extremism in a Western context.

Cluster One: Losing Faith in the Militant Ideology

The first cluster that emerges from the case studies consists of exits related to ideological doubt.

Though there are obvious differences between the narratives and worldviews of the different types of extremism, there are also some similar elements. The militant ideology tells a story about a world divided into “us” and “them” where they are powerful, evil and murderous and we have no other choice than to take up arms to defend ourselves and our just cause. Violence is depicted as a sacred, transformative and/or liberating force. Engaging in violence is the way to create a better world and the way to become a stronger, better and more authentic person.⁷

Even if the militant worldview looks farfetched to an outsider, its internal logic is strong and all individual parts are robustly interrelated. Moreover, it frequently incorporates elements of conspiratorial thinking, permitting it to reject contradictory views or information as “just another part of the conspiracy.” But occasionally, the narrative loses its hold. The first pattern that stands out when looking across the available case studies indicates that a group of once dedicated extremists become disillusioned and eventually leave because they lose faith in the militant narrative. Some leave because central claims stop making sense – the division of the world into “us” and “them” or the notion that violence is transformative and liberating. Others lose faith in absolutist claims of the militant narrative and apparently realize that there are more points of view. To some exiters the loss of faith appears to be a gradual process. To others it happens due to one eye-opening and dramatic experience.

One particularly potent trigger seems to be a confrontation with the real, bloody consequences of violence. A fascination with violence is characteristic for militant narratives and propaganda across different forms of extremism. “Their” violence and the resulting human suffering is displayed and

emphasized in the communication, frequently with heartbreaking footage of dead, wounded or suffering civilians. “Our” violence, on the other hand, is glorified and celebrated as the only possible response to the injustices taking place. The consequences of the militants’ own violence are glossed over or the victims are presented as faceless and anonymous non-humans. In the real world, things are obviously different and confronted with the human costs of violence some begin to doubt.

Stories of extremists who eventually exit due to doubt after having caused death or harm to a presumed enemy abound in the case studies. Members of extreme left wing and separatist/nationalist groups tell of nagging questions and growing doubt: What if we were wrong about this person’s role? How about his family and their pain? In some cases doubt connected to the use of violence seems to be reinforced by a notion that the violence is not leading to the political and ideological goals of the militant movement, but instead to isolation and marginalization. And if violence does not lead to the goal, some exiters conclude, the human costs of a militant campaign on both sides of the conflict becomes difficult to legitimize.⁸ These exiters implicitly reject a central claim in militant ideologies: The notion that violence is not just a means to an end, but a cleansing, transformative and emancipatory force. That violence takes the activist closer to God, or in the secular militant ideologies, permits the activist to become a truly free and authentic person.

On the extreme right wing, the case studies also document several exits that appear to be triggered by doubt related to the role and nature of violence. Within the right wing extremist milieu the doubts seem less articulated and less intellectualized, but the pattern is the same: The exiters describe their shock over the consequences of specific acts of violence, like beatings of presumed racial enemies, or they describe a more general anxiety and a notion that “things are going to far.”⁹

Another trigger of ideological doubt seems to be the entrance of a significant other into the world of the extremist - a person who in a credible and convincing way represents a different perspective from the militant's. The significant other may be a romantic partner, but can also be a fellow human being who displays concern, interest and willingness to engage. In some cases, the person belongs to the extremist's out-group, but acts kindly, selflessly and justly. When this happens, a central notion in militant narratives across different forms of extremism comes under pressure: The division of the world into us and them where we are good and just and they are evil, devious and murderous. The case studies contain examples of how extremists for different reasons find themselves in the company of the presumed enemy and are forced to admit exceptions to their stereotypes, eventually leading to a broader questioning of the enemy images of the militant narrative. Also, a friendly or professional approach on part of representatives of the state – another presumed enemy – can apparently sow a seed of doubt.¹⁰

Whereas there are numerous examples of further radicalization taking place in prisons, there are also examples of how prisons provide a setting where extremist views are challenged. The prison might force extremist into contact with members of the extremist's outgroup who do not live up to the negative stereotypes. But most importantly, a prison term frequently represents a serious disruption in the life of the extremist and becomes a prod to take stock. Some exiters describe how a deeper and solitary look at their ideological convictions made them realize that their interpretation might have been misguided. At the intersection between disengagement related to ideological doubt and disengagement related to personal and practical circumstances, some exiters also recount how a prison term made them realize that they were on track to throw away their lives while changing nothing in society.¹¹

Finally, the studies contain examples of how some exiters at some point and for different reasons become able to see the militant narrative from the outside. Increased contact with the outside world, travel, time to reflect and/or isolation from the militant group can make some of the taken for granted truths of the militant narrative seem less plausible. Once an exiter is able to step outside the narrative and realize how self-referential and self-sustaining it is, he or she might feel disillusioned, even cheated. And since most parts of the militant narrative are closely interrelated, once an extremist begins to question one element, the whole world view may eventually collapse. A number of militant Islamists and former left wing extremists seem to have exited once they gained a perspective on the militant narrative and realized that the reality was a good deal more complex than what the militant narrative postulated.¹²

Cluster Two: Group and Leadership Failure

A second cluster emerging from the case studies consist of exits related to disappointment and disillusionment with the internal dynamics of the militant group or with the group's leadership.

We know from research into radicalization, that a number of individuals are attracted to extremist groups because of the community and sense of belonging they offer. We also see in the militant propaganda how the "we" is contrasted to "them" and how it is idealized and glorified. "We" are depicted as a courageous, honourable, selfless, authentic, mutually supportive group - an avant garde with a deeper insight than the majority and a willingness to act instead of just talking. The leaders in such groups are naturally expected to embody these values and to be models and examples to be followed.¹³

Not surprisingly, such ideals frequently clash with the reality. Just as we saw above, some exiters go through a gradual process of disillusionment. Others experience a moment of reckoning triggered by a specific situation or incident where they feel let down or ill treated by fellow extremists or leaders.

Numerous exiters from right wing extremist groups tell of their disappointment when realizing the extent of internal bickering, self-seeking behaviour, mutual suspicion, competition and backstabbing in the group. Some tell of gradually losing the sense of attachment and of the fatigue resulting from constantly having ones level of commitment questioned. Others are abruptly disabused of their illusions, when presumed brothers turn them in or let them down in a moment of need, for example in connection with a trial. Some even experience having their lives threatened by those they felt the closest to.¹⁴

Exiters from militant Islamism tell similar tales. One exiter relates how he was wounded during a stay in a training camp and then left to his own devices in terms of getting out and obtaining medical treatment. Another describes the feeling of let down when promises of help to leave a country at a time when authorities were believed to close in, did not materialize.¹⁵

On the extreme left, and at the intersection between doubts related to ideology and doubts related to group failure, some exiters point out how the use of violence externally at a certain point begins to infect and corrupt also relations internally between group members. It becomes tempting to seek to settle internal disagreements with the use of force as well, they indicate. Some also complain that

criminal or reckless individuals are permitted to join their group or movement, undermining its coherence or its broader social support.¹⁶

Self-seeking, manipulative, cowardly or outright incompetent leaders appear frequently in the narratives of ex-militants across different forms of extremism. On the right wing it appears that many are disappointed when realizing that the leaders are unable to live up to the ideals of physical strength, courage and intelligence. Others note that in moments of danger or when apprehended by authorities, the leaders appear to gladly sell out to save their own skin.¹⁷

Former militant Islamists likewise tell of their disillusionment when they realized how they or others were regarded as dispensable cannon fodder by the leadership. Or how the leaders seemed to care more about power and money than about the cause.¹⁸

Former Weathermen and RAF members point to how the leaders, despite an egalitarian and anti-materialistic ideology, reserved certain privileges for themselves. Tales of brutal internal “criticism sessions” where dissent is squashed by the dominating faction also abound. Former ETA members moreover complain about opaque politicking within the group and – interlocking with doubt arising over a loss of faith in the militant ideology’s glorification of violence – about irresponsible and excessive targeting of civilians and of former members, ordered by the group leadership.¹⁹

It appears that across the different forms of extremism, the strongly dualistic world view with its sharp division of the world into us and them, right and wrong, black and white turns into a liability to the extremist group in the sense that it precludes a flexible handling of internal conflicts. Conflict resolution is reduced to two options: Either the dissenter is forced completely back into line or the

dissenter is excluded. Since the ideology is presumed to represent the world as it really is – the truth – dissent is ascribed to character weakness, personal flaws or deviousness. Such modes of conflict resolution can place a lid on dissent, but at a certain point it is likely to boil over and a number of individuals, as illustrated by the case studies, are bound to head for the door.

Cluster Three: Personal and Practical Circumstances

Extremism is a grave societal problem with weighty negative consequences for both victims and perpetrators. It thus appears natural to assume that decisions to enter or exit from extremism are deliberate and reflected decisions, based on weighty political, ideological, existential or theological considerations. And the case studies demonstrate that ideological doubt does figure prominently in connection with a number of exits. But there are also examples of more mundane and practical exit reasons. A third and final cluster of exits emerging from the case studies consists of exits related to practical and personal factors such as burn out, frontline fatigue, growing older, missing loved ones, longing for a normal life, or feeling guilty about the impact of ones extremism on friends and family.

Growing older appears to be an important disengagement factor. The case studies contain examples of how front line activism begins to feel unnatural and awkward to a number of individuals as they enter their thirties and start thinking more seriously about getting a job, starting a career, having a family and a decent place to live.²⁰ The extremist lifestyle of constant activism and confrontations with the presumed enemy also takes its toll. A number of individuals in the case studies describe a sense of confusion and fatigue preceding their exit. Just like doubts related to the legitimacy of using violence, the feeling of burn out appears to be a particularly powerful push towards exit if it

coincides with a notion that the extremist group is not making any progress towards its social and political goals.²¹

The studies also indicate how sanctions from the authorities might prompt disengagement. A number of extremists, particularly on the right wing, appear to experience a moment of reckoning in connection with receiving a prison term. They then disengage in an effort to come clear before something even worse happens. The wish to “get a hold on life” can become a particularly potent reason to leave when combined with a feeling of guilt towards close friends and family. A number of exiters describe how the quiet but plainly visible pain of family members made a deep impression on them.²² Some former extremists also indicate that they disengaged out of concern that police investigations or sanctions might end up implicating friends and family directly.²³ A related impetus for exit appears to be the notion of responsibility towards a child or a new girlfriend, which the exiter feels should be protected from the potentially traumatic experiences that goes with having a parent or partner engaged with extremism.²⁴

Quitting, in many of these instances, becomes more a pragmatic choice than something prompted by an ideological change of heart. A number of exiters explicitly state that though they behave differently they think the same. Others claim that even if their exit had nothing to do with ideological doubt, their attitudes gradually changed as they stopped spending time with their extremist peers.²⁵

¹ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (2010): 797-814.

² Emma Disley, Kristin Weed, Anaïs Reding, Lindsay Clutterbuck, Richard Warnes, Individual disengagement from Al Qa'ida-influenced terrorist groups. A Rapid Evidence Assessment to inform policy and practice in preventing terrorism. RAND Europe (2011).

³ Examples of insightful studies of collective disengagement includes Roglieo Alonso, "Why Do Terrorists Stop? Analyzing Why ETA Members Abandon or Continue With Terrorism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34 (2011): 696-716; Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists*; Ashour, "Post-Jihadism"; Martha Crenshaw, "How Terrorism Declines." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3.1 (1991): 69-87; Audrey Kurt Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends. Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); Alison Jamieson, "Identity and Morality in the Italian Red Brigades." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4 (1990): 508-520. The review also excludes autobiographies by former extremists as they represent subjective perspectives with an inherent risk of bias. Otherwise interesting autobiographies include Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation. Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1989), 275-365; Ed Husein, *The Islamist. Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left* (London: Penguin Books, 2007); Kent Lindahl and Janne Mattson. *Exit. Min väg bort från nazismen* (Stockholm: Nordstedts Förlag, 2000); Shane O'Doherty, *The Volunteer. A Former IRA Man's True Story* (New York: Strategic Book Publishing, 2008).

⁴ Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan. "Introduction," in Bjørgo and Horgan, eds. *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, 4.

⁵ James A. Aho, *This Thing of Darkness. A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994); Arnstberg and Hållén, *Smaka kanga*; Kate Barrelle, *From terrorist to citizen*. Victoria: Monach University. Accessed on March 16, 2012. <http://law.anu.edu.au/COAST/events/APSA/papers/193.pdf>; Tore Bjørgo and Yngve Carlsson, "Early Intervention with Violent and Racist Youth Groups." Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. NUPI Paper 677 (2005); Tore Bjørgo, "Processes of disengagement form violent groups of the extreme right". In *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and collective disengagement*. Edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009); Centrum för kunskap om brott och åtgärder mot brott, *Exit för avhoppar*; Loren Christensen, *Skinhead Street Gangs* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1994); Froujke Demant, Marieke Sloomman, Frank Buijs and Jean Tillie. *Decline and Disengagement. An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation*. Amsterdam: IMES, 2008; Docurama, *The Weather Underground*. The Free History Project. DVD (2003); John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism. Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Groups* (London: Routledge, 2009); Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts*; George Kassimeris, "Why Greek Terrorists Give Up: Analyzing Individual Exit from the Revolutionary Organization 17 November." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34 (2011): 556-571; Tom Olsen, "Nynazistiske miljøer. En studie om tilslutnings- og exitprosessene." MA diss. University of Stavanger (2010/2011); Jon A. Olsen, "Roads to Militant Radicalization. Interviews With Five Former Perpetrators of Politically Motivated Organized Violence." DIIS Report 12. Danish Institute for International Studies (2009); Fernando Reinares, "Exit From Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement Among Members of ETA." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 (2011): 780-803; Rommelspacher, "Der Hass"; Lorenzo Vidino, "The Buccinasco Pentiti: A Unique Case Study of Radicalization." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 (2011): 398-418. Two excellent articles on exit have not been included as they do not contain new primary sources (Assaf Moghadam, "Failure and Disengagement in the Red Army Faction." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35 (2012): 156-181; Fernando Reinares, "Why Do Terrorists Stop? Analyzing Why ETA Members Abandon or Continue with Terrorism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34 (2011): 696-716).

⁶ The pattern of three clusters largely corresponds to the conclusions of Demant et al., who, based on 20 interviews, point to three disengagement factors. Normative factors (the group's ideology stops providing meaning), affective factors (the group no longer meets the exiter's social needs) and continuance factors (the personal costs and practical life circumstances connected with the extremist engagement becomes too high) (Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 111-117).

⁷ Inspire Magazine. 2011. Accessed on April 16, 2012. <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/inspire-magazine-7.pdf>; William M. Pierce (alias Andrew Macdonald), *The Turner Diaries* (Hillsboro: National Vanguard Books, 1978); Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home. The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁸ Barrelle, *From terrorist to citizen*; Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 125; Docurama, *The Weather Underground*; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 90; Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts*, 11; Kassimeris, "Why Greek Terrorists Give Up", 561; Reinares, "Exit From Terrorism", 783 and 794.

⁹ Arnstberg and Hållén, *Smaka kanga*, 37; Bjørgo, "Processes of disengagement", 37; Bjørgo and Carlsson, "Early Intervention", 26; Christensen, *Skinhead*, 220.

¹⁰ Aho, *This Thing of Darkness*, 143; Arnstberg and Hållén, *Smaka kanga*, 42; Christensen, *Skinhead*, 222; Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts*, 15; Rommelspacher, "Der Hass", 188.

¹¹ Arnstberg og Hållén, *Smaka kanga*, 36; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 45 and 56; Olsen, "Roads to Militant Radicalization", 53; Olsen, "Nynazistiske miljøer", 48; Rommelspacher, "Der Hass", 180.

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- ¹² *Decline and Disengagement*, 128; Olsen “Roads to Militant Radicalization”, 52; Vidino, “The Buccinasco Pentiti”, 411.
- ¹³ Inspire Magazine; Pierce, *The Turner Diaries*; Varon, *Bringing the War Home*.
- ¹⁴ Arnstberg og Hållén, , *Smaka kanga*, 36; Bjørge, “Processes of disengagement”, 37; Bjørge and Carlsson, “Early Intervention”, 27; Centrum för kunskap om brott och åtgärder mot brott, *Exit för avhopp*, 41; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*”, 151 and 155.
- ¹⁵ Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts*, 14; Vidino, “The Buccinasco Pentiti”, 410.
- ¹⁶ Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 131-132.
- ¹⁷ Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 133; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 792; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*”, 158.
- ¹⁸ Vidino, “The Buccinasco Pentiti”, 412; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 69.
- ¹⁹ Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 789.
- ²⁰ Barrelle, *From terrorist to citizen*; Bjørge and Carlsson, “Early Intervention”, 29; Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 138; Olsen, “Roads to Militant Radicalization”, 53; Olsen, “Nynazistiske miljøer”, 48; Kassimeris, “Why Greek Terrorists Give Up”, 526; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 796.
- ²¹ Arnstberg og Hållén, , *Smaka kanga*, 38; Barelle; Bjørge, “Processes of disengagement”, 38 and 40; Docurama, *The Weather Underground*; Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts*, 12; Kassimeris, “Why Greek Terrorists Give Up”, 562; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 796.
- ²² Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 797; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*”, 179.
- ²³ Olsen, “Roads to Militant Radicalization”, 54.
- ²⁴ Aho, *This Thing of Darkness*, 135; Demant et al. *Decline and Disengagement*, 139; Olsen, “Nynazistiske miljøer”, 48; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 703; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*”, 194.
- ²⁵ Arnstberg og Hållén, , *Smaka kanga*, 38; Bjørge, “Processes of disengagement”, 37; Centrum för kunskap om brott och åtgärder mot brott, *Exit för avhopp*, 26-27; Docurama, *The Weather Underground*; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism”, 798; Rommeslpacher, “*Der Hass*”, 174.