

Voluntary Disengagement from terrorism

**Why Doing Nothing is a Good Policy Option for Handling (Some)
Returning Foreign Fighters**

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Outline

- Why study disengagement? And how?
- Data: Aggregation of primary source based case studies
- Why people leave violent extremism:
 - Cracks in the ideology/group dysfunction/changing personal priorities
- Do sanctions help or hurt?
- Disengagement and returning foreign fighters

Why study disengagement?

- Who leaves? High/low; veteran/newcomer; killer/non-criminal...
- No common profile.
- No theory. Very little existing knowledge → exploratory approach.
- Data to probe "beneath the surface," interviews.
 - Scientific studies.
 - Western context.
 - Case studies on militant Islamism, left wing extremism, right wing extremism, separatist terrorism.

Data: Aggregation of primary source based case studies

Militant Islamism	Extreme Right	Extreme Left	Seperatist	Unspecified
19	107	29	42	37

Number of interviews/individual disengagers in case studies.

Why people leave violent extremism:

1. Ideological doubt.

- Presumed enemy, which does not act like one.
- Exposure to real consequences of extremist violence.
- Increased exposure to world outside.

2. Disillusionment with extremist peers or leaders.

3. Changing personal priorities.

- Growing older.
- Guilt feelings.
- Burn out.

Do sanctions help or hurt?

- Legal sanctions/prison term.
- Threat of or application of other sanctions (surveillance, disruption, travel ban, withdrawal of welfare, expulsion from educational institutions).
- Social sanctions (named/shamed, confronted on ideas, parental intervention).
- It depends.....

Disengagement and returning foreign fighters?

- Thomas Hegghammer: 1/9 became involved with terrorism against the West.
- By implication: 8/9 did not.
- No data on individual level characteristics or circumstances.

Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Are conclusions applicable?

Militant Islamism, with foreign fighting or training exp.	Militant Islamism, no foreign fighting or training exp.	Extreme Right	Extreme Left	Seperatist	Unspecified
3	16	107	29	42	37

Number of interviews/individual disengagers in case studies.

Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Are conclusions applicable?

- Across from different kinds of extremism?
 - Comparative studies generally find same patterns in terms of why people doubt and disengage across from different kinds of extremism.
- Across from cases with and without foreign fighting or training camp experience?
 - Foreign fighters more deeply radicalized/less likely to experience ideological doubt?
 - Foreign fighters more effectively integrated with their peers/less likely to become disillusioned with group?
 - Foreign fighters less likely to change personal priorities/long for normal life, guilt feelings, suffer burn out?

Tentative conclusion: No basic differences in push and pull factors.

Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Policy implications?

- High number of returning fighters.
- Don't get in the way of natural disengagement processes!
- Sanctions will help or hurt, depending on individual circumstances.
- General, punitive measures are likely to push some individuals back into the arms of extremist groups that they would otherwise have left behind.
- Doing nothing not viable. Individualize interventions. Match complexity with complexity.
- Mobilize knowledge, resources, competencies in governance networks of central + local government + concerned civil society.

Thank you

Defining disengagement

- "The action or proces of withdrawing from involvement in an activity, situation, or group." Oxford Dictionary
- "Proces of becoming less radical in behaviour and beliefs." Demant, Slotman, Buijs and Tillie.
- **Behavioral** indicators:
 - No longer engaging in violence.
 - No longer engaging in other forms of support for extr. groups.
 - No longer socializing with violent extremists.
 - Actively engaging in countering violent extremism.