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Dreams and disillusionment: Engagement in and disengagement from militant extremist groups

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People engage in terrorism and similar forms of violent extremism for a variety of reasons, political or non-political. In general, they do so to fulfill a dream, a need or an urge to do or achieve something. The frequent failure to achieve what they expected or dreamed about is also usually the source of their disillusionment, and subsequently, a main reason to disengage from violent extremism – providing that they are able to do so.

Individuals who have been involved in violent Jihad or in other types of terrorist activities come from a diversity of social backgrounds und have undergone rather different processes of violent radicalisation. There is no single terrorist profile or a single root cause which is behind radicalisation into terrorism [1, 3, 8, 10:810, 18].[1] These understandings have led many observers to make two negative conclusions: 1) profiling in order to identify possible terrorists does not work; 2) some will also argue that it is futile to try to develop strategies for preventing these diverse radicalisation processes as no such measures will be able to fit them all.

However, it is possible that if one size does not fit them all, tailor-made interventions might be developed. We will come back to that possibility later.

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[1] For example, the *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005* [19] stated: 'What we know of previous extremists in the UK shows that *there is not a consistent profile to help identify who may be vulnerable to radicalisation*. Of the 4 individuals here, 3 were second generation British citizens whose parents were of Pakistani origin and one whose parents were of Jamaican origin; [one] was an Algerian failed asylum seeker; [another] had an English mother and Jamaican father. Others of interest have been white converts. Some have been well-educated, some less so. Some genuinely poor, some less so. Some apparently well integrated in the UK, others not. Most single, but some family men with children. Some previously law-abiding, others with a history of petty crime. In a few cases there is evidence of abuse or other trauma in early life, but in others their upbringing has been stable and loving' [19: 31].

Profiling in order to identify specific individuals involved in terrorism or vulnerable to radicalisation into violence by narrowing down from a wider population turns out to be of limited use, producing too many false positives as well as false negatives: people who fit the stereotype of (potential) terrorists without being a (potential) terrorist; and real terrorists who go undetected because they do not fit the stereotype. Profiling of dimensions, processes and pathways is far a more promising approach [12:60, 13]. By understanding these various processes and pathways there may also be some openings for identifying possible preventive interventions which may be used to disrupt processes of radicalisation into violence and facilitating disengagement.

Several studies of diverse types of violent groups have – at least to some extent – been able to identify a limited number of types of persons involved in violent groups, and which are characterised by different background factors and paths of radicalisation. A German study by Helmut Willems [22, 23] classified perpetrators of xenophobic violence into four main varieties: 'Right-wing activists', 'Ethnocentric youths', 'Criminal youths', and 'Fellow-travellers'. These were characterised by different profiles in terms of political/ideological motivation, organisational affiliation, socio-economic background, education, criminal records, and the use of violence. A study of Jihadi terrorist cells in Europe by Petter Nesser [15, 16, 17] found that these cells typically consisted of four main categories of terrorist cell members - the entrepreneur, the protégé, the misfit and the drifter. Each type had different socio-economic background and related to ideology and politics in different ways. Interestingly, these two typologies are in full agreement in describing three of the four types of activists, even if the political and ideological orientations of these groups are very different.

However, a problem with typologies or profiles based on static ideal types is that many individual activists do not fit in, or they fall between the ideal types and become indistinct. Typologies which work well for one type of group or movement may not work equally well when applied to another movement. An alternative and more dynamic approach is to describe individuals involved in extremist groups along several dimensions or continuums. A number of dimensions or variables could be included, such as age, gender or altruism/egotism, but for our analytical purpose here the four following dimensions are selected:
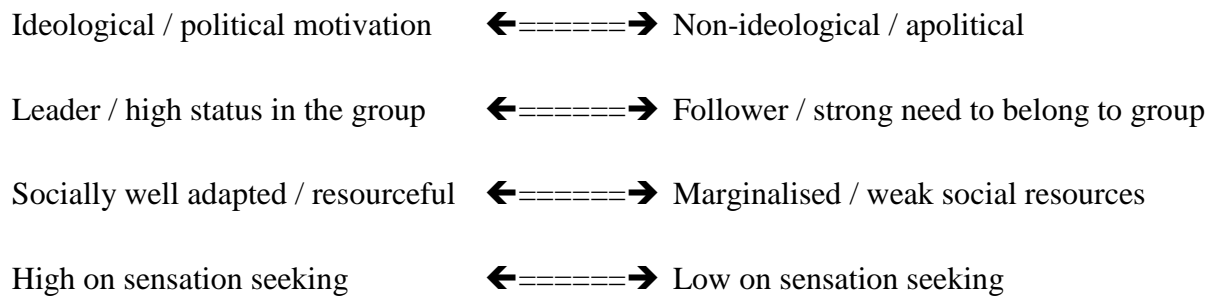
Ideological / political motivation   ⬅======➡   Non-ideological / apolitical

Leader / high status in the group   ⬅======➡   Follower / strong need to belong to group

Socially well adapted / resourceful   ⬅======➡   Marginalised / weak social resources

High on sensation seeking   ⬅======➡   Low on sensation seeking

Figure 1: Dimensions of radicalising actors

These dimensions should be considered as dynamic continuums rather than as static positions. Any individual may during his or her life or extremist career move from one end of the continuum towards the other. Thus, a person starting out as apolitical may become highly politicised and ideological, or move from being a follower to become a leader with a higher status. Quite commonly, individuals do not join an extremist group because they hold extremist worldviews; they adopt extremist worldviews because they have become involved with an extremist group for quite other reasons. A person may also start out as relatively marginalised and become socially better adapted and integrated into society – or may fall from a good position in society into the margins, e.g. due to involvement in violent extremism, being caught for crimes or drug abuse. Moreover, a person joining an extremist group in search of action and excitement may calm down with age or burn out due to constant pressure and exhaustion.

Different extremist or terrorist groups may also be described as consisting of diverse mixtures of people who at any moment in time are placed at various ends of the continuum. Thus, some groups may have a large proportion of leaders and followers at the ideological and socially well adapted ends of the continuums. Other groups may start out with only a few of these as leaders and a larger proportion of marginalised and apolitical followers, some of whom may gradually become more politicised. These different types of individuals will usually perform different and complementary roles within each group [2:48-51].

Thus, the types described here, partly based on the typologies of Willems [23] (refined by Bjørgo [2]) and Nesser [17] should not be considered as static profiles but rather as positions which individuals to various extents may move towards or away from within processes of

radicalisation or deradicalisation – although some of their individual traits and qualities may tie them more firmly to some positions than to others.

What follows from the understanding that terrorist groups may consist of different types of individuals who undergo diverse paths of radicalisation is *not* that it is futile to develop strategies of prevention to target all these diverse types. Rather, it follows that it is necessary to develop *several* specific measures which may fit each separate type or dimension. Some of these types are susceptible to socio-economic interventions, others to psycho-social factors and others to ideological and political issues. Thus, preventive strategies have to be tailored to the specific drivers behind each main type of activist and the specifics of the various groups. The different dimensions described above may help us to suggest several points of intervention in order to induce different types of (potential) activists to break off their processes of radicalisation or to disengage from the militant group they have been part of. Different strategies of prevention or intervention are likely to have different effects on different activists because they have different needs and vulnerabilities.

Thus, the types or profiles described here should *not* be considered as a tool to identify potential terrorists. They should rather be seen as an aid to develop more specific and targeted strategies for preventing violent radicalisation and facilitating disengagement, taking into account the diversity of violent activists. The profiles below should be understood as ideal types, but not as static positions, as the typology is based on dimensions which represent dynamic continuums. Thus, it follows that during their extremist careers individuals may move from resembling one type initially into acquiring more of the characteristics of other types at later stages.

Ideological activists
One particular type of radicalisation process characterises *ideological activists* who play leading roles in terrorist cells. They are often charismatic persons motivated by idealism and a strong sense of justice, responding to the suffering of others – be it fellow Muslims or other objects of identification, globally or locally. Jihadism or other varieties of political violence are embraced through an intellectual process where the need to take action gradually becomes

a political or religious duty [17]. These altruistic persons are often resourceful, educated, well integrated and in some cases even considered as role models in their communities [21.[2]

One particular variety is the experienced *Jihadi veterans* who have taken part in armed struggle at some of the war theatres for Jihad (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia) and possess a certain heroic image as well as combat experience. They may also serve as linkages to the movement of global Jihad. Another and younger variety may be described as the *protégé* of the leader [17]. They tend to embrace Jihadism or other forms of militancy through a combination of loyalty to the leader and political activism. Although often intelligent, skilful and socially well adapted, they may also be impressionable and easily manipulated by the elders they look up to.

Those who score high on ideological and political motivation may become disillusioned when they realise that the group or struggle does not further their cause or improve the plights of the population they claim to fight for. Thus, although some wanted to fight for the cause of the Muslims, it might be troubling that eight times more Muslims than Westerners are killed by al-Qaida, according to some accounts [11, 14]. They might also be troubled by contradictions between violent means and political ends, from engaging in behaviour that conflicts with one's beliefs, or other forms of cognitive dissonance. Although hard to persuade, they might in such circumstances also be challenged on ideological grounds.

However, those who have scored high on leadership are also vulnerable to loss of status and confidence within the group. In such situations of status loss, the option of disengagement may become more attractive than when they were leaders everyone looked up to. Sometimes it might even be possible to "help" leaders to lose status and confidence within their milieu through various forms of intervention (e.g. by releasing discrediting information about them). A combination of political disillusionment and loss of status or leadership role increases the likelihood of disengagement from the group and subsequent deradicalisation on the ideological level (which often is a gradual process). This may also be reinforced by a tendency towards exhaustion and burn-out among individuals who have been highly committed over a long period, in particular if they live under high pressure and danger.

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[2] One striking example is the leader of the London 7-7 (2005) bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan, who was well educated and a well-regarded community activist involved in voluntary work for youths and children [17: 102-4].

There is also an added value when such leading people disengage because they may provide powerful messages to warn young people against joining such extremist movements, and may also open the path of disengagement for other discontent participants in the movement they belonged to. What made them leaders and spokesmen for radicalisation may also make them important leaders for disengagement and deradicalisation, having a special credibility due their experience. There are several prominent examples of this from (pro-)Jihadi groups as well as from neo-Nazi and other types of violent radical groups. Sometimes they also play important roles in establishing, figure-heading and/or running organisations or programmes for disengagement and deradicalisation, such as the Exit programmes for former neo-Nazis in Sweden and Germany, the Indonesian programme for rehabilitating members of *Jema'a Islamiya*, and the Quillam Foundation established by British ex-militant Islamists [7].

Drifters and followers

For some youths, the experience of belonging to a group and being accepted by peers or leaders is a primary value, sometimes overruling most other considerations. What kind of group and cause they end up with is often a matter of chance and situation. Being part of a militant group provides a powerful identity. They seek friends, comradeship, protection and fulfillment of a number of social needs [21:86-7, 23, 2:201-7]. Ideology does not matter much to these drifters, at least initially, neither are they holding any particularly extremist worldviews nor exhibit any pronounced political attitudes. Neither are their backgrounds typically characterised by socio-economic problems, unemployment or dropping out of school – although having experienced loneliness and having been victims of bullying is rather common (2:203-4; 6:107-9, 4:56-7]. The search for community and group solidarity plays an important role in attracting them to these groups. When it comes to readiness for violence, group-dynamic aspects (conformity and the need to impress the others) are decisive. They do not typically display any fundamental readiness to violence or general hatred to specific enemies on their own. They may, however, be quite willing to carry out acts of violence in order to prove themselves in the eyes of others in the group, or may take part in order not to leave the others in the lurch [23:173]. They are rarely initiators of radicalisation into extremist ideology or violence, but are, by definition, supporters and followers.

A special variety of drifters concerns *converts*. This could be converts to Islam who become part of Jihadi cells; or non-whites who become part of militant neo-Nazi groups; or

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individuals from an ethno-national majority who become members of a group fighting for the rights or secession of a ethno-national minority. Because these odd individuals are somewhat out of place, they feel a strong need to prove themselves as a worthy and trusted member of the group. They may try to achieve this by expressing strong ideological views and willingness to commit acts of violence. Thus, they might appear as among the most extreme members of the group, at least at the level of expression. Some individuals of this type have rather marginalised backgrounds and are in it for their own sake (see below); others might be resourceful and altruistic.

Those who score low on ideological and political motivation are easier to sway away from the cause, although ideological debates may not necessarily address their main concerns. If they are mainly motivated by companionship and the need to belong to a group, they are also highly vulnerable to disillusionment if the friends, the group or the leaders do not live up to the high expectations of friendship, loyalty and leadership.

Ex-members of militant neo-Nazi groups have recounted how leaders tried to manipulate them to get involved in acts of violence they themselves were not comfortable with, using pressure as well as promises of rewards to induce them [2:217-218]. People who have volunteered for Jihad to fight the American invaders in Iraq or Afghanistan have told about how the local leaders tried to persuade them to take part in suicide attacks – not at all what they came for. Defectors from the Colombian FARC guerillas and other militant groups left the group because they were disappointed by the double standards of the leaders – demanding sacrifice and an ascetic life-style from the foot-soldiers while the leaders were enjoying the good life [20:160].

Having high expectations about friendship, loyalty and comradeship, it will come as a strong disappointment that life in a militant group is often characterized by paranoia, distrust, back-stabbing and betrayal. Pressure from outside and the fear of infiltration produce a strong sense of paranoia within the group, and this may often cause people to accuse one another of being infiltrators or potential traitors. Disseminating scandalous rumours and stories about other members is also a common practice in some extremist groups – in particular in some of the neo-Nazi groups I studied [2:217-219; see also 20:160].

A British militant Islamist, Maajid Nawaz, was arrested on his arrival to Egypt. He spent months and years rotting in an Egyptian prison. None of his friends in the Islamist movement ever tried to contact him or help him – he was left to his own destiny. The only ones who intervened on his behalf and tried to get him out was – surprise – Amnesty International. When he was finally released, he left the Jihadist movement and became a co-founder of the Quilliam Foundation, a British think-tank working to counter violent radicalisation.[3]

For those primarily motivated by a need for belonging, alternative groups or new "significant others" might replace bonds to the radicalised group or cell. Devotion to a romantic partner outside the group or parental obligations for children may also lead the young person to leave the group due to conflicting loyalties and commitments and setting different priorities. Interestingly, both the Exit projects for facilitating disengagement from right-wing extremist group, and the Saudi rehabilitation programme for Jihadis have in different (culture specific) ways tried to involve families and prospective spouses as a way of tying these ex-activists up in social commitments and ties. The Saudi programme actually helped to arrange and finance weddings for graduates of their rehabilitation programme [9:217]. In a very difficult Scandinavian context, the Exit programmes were very much aware of the reintegrating effects for ex-extremists of finding girl-/boyfriends outside the militant scene but could not go further than helping the clients to get into mainstream social groups and activities where chances were good for meeting persons of the opposite sex [2:222; 5:140].

Socially frustrated youths
go through quite different paths of radicalisation into militancy and terrorism. Usually they have a personal (real or imagined) experience of discrimination or unfair competition with other groups over scarce resources, feeling that they have no prospects for a good future [23, 2:49-50, 330-332]. They have limited education or other forms of social capital and may suffer from unemployment and economic hardship. They usually do not hold any firm extremist ideas or ideologies, at least initially. Violence against enemies is legitimised less by reference to ideology or political strategies than by diffuse feelings of anger. At the extreme end of this dimension are *criminal and marginalised individuals* who are characterised by even more negative social backgrounds and careers, and especially by having a long and often

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[3]http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amnesty-international/the-story-of-maajid-nawaz_b_370528.html;
http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/maajid-nawaz.html.

varied criminal record. They tend to be school drop-outs and unemployed. The family background is particularly problematic: Broken families, parental substance abuse, the use of violence as a means of discipline and communication within the family, family members killed in war, or other traumatic experiences. They are action-oriented, aggressive and have a high readiness for violence. However, violence is not a means in a political struggle, but rather an everyday element in handling conflicts [23]. This type of activist is not an idealist but embraces violent activism to cope with personal problems [17:93-4]. This pattern of recruitment and radicalization into Jihadism has been referred to as a form of personal salvation, "self healing" or conversion. In spite of their troubled backgrounds and lack of discipline, such persons may be an asset to the group due to their high readiness for – and experience with – violence, and competence in other forms of criminal activities in order to generate funding for terrorist projects.

Some join terrorist or other militant groups because they are attracted by the violence, militancy and excitement. They may have fantasies about the adventures and heroism of being involved in a militant struggle. It is the ultimate fulfillment of masculine ideals – being a real man. However, reality may be disappointing. Life as a terrorist may be boring most of the time, with endless waiting for action without anything happening. On the other hand, those attracted by action may get more than they asked for. Being the hunter may be demanding; being the prey hunted by police, military and intelligence forces may be extremely stressful and exhausting in the long run. The reality of killing or wounding others may also be shocking. The pain, suffering and screaming of victims, often innocent civilians, may make them feel bad. The death or suffering of wounded comrades is not at all as glorious as they had expected.

Socio-economic policies may have a preventive function in relation to those who are affected by discrimination, unemployment and various forms of social, economic and cultural marginalisation. This is the case with some proportion of those who have been involved in various types of terrorism in Europe but hardly the majority of them. Some measures should be directed at entire populations or minority groups among them (such as newly arrived immigrants) in order to facilitate general integration into society (primary prevention); other interventions should be targeted at risk categories, e.g. youths from poor Muslim households in inner-city areas (secondary prevention); and some social measures should target specifically young people who are already involved with extremist groups, such as training

for jobs where they can interact socially with positive role models and get prospects for a more positive future (tertiary prevention).

Concluding remarks

The processes of becoming engaged in militant extremist groups have some important bearings on the processes of disengagement. Disillusionment about what initially attracted them into the movement – whether that was political goals, a search for friendship or a sense of belonging and purpose – is one of the main factors leading towards a process of leaving the militant movement or group. However, disengagement is far from being a simple reversal or mirror-image of the initial process of engagement in militant extremism. In the course of their extremist careers, individual activists tend to change values and motivations as well as positions and roles within the militant group. What brought them into militant activities or groups in the first place may or may not be the same as what sustains their continued involvement. Still, a better understanding of the processes causing disillusionment for different types of militant activists may offer possibilities for reinforcing these processes and facilitating a higher rate of individual disengagement from extremist groups and activities.

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