

Violent Extremism in the 21st Century

Violent Extremism in the 21st Century:

International Perspectives

Edited by

Gwynyth Overland, Arnfinn J. Andersen,
Kristin Engh Førde, Kjetil Grødum
and Joseph Salomonsen

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Kjetil Grødum and Joseph Salomonsen

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INTRODUCTION

THE EDITORS

Is “radicalisation” a one-way ticket to violent extremism—or a force for progressive change? In the first decades of the 21st century, governments all over the world concern themselves with the perceived threat of radicalisation and violent extremism. Global political elites have unfurled the banners of violent extremism as the paramount challenge. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared in 2007 that radical Jihad is the only clear and present danger to human progress and liberal democracy. Terms used in the field, such as radicalisation, are ambiguous; the points of departure have been ethnocentric, and concepts to combat the threat such as “war on terror” may have fostered terrorism. Yet in the theatre of ideologies, the propaganda promulgated by extremists appears to gain ground. In short, the approach has in some ways been counterproductive. We hope that this anthology will move away from an ethnocentric paradigm, towards a more balanced analysis.

What do the terms “radical” and “radicalisation” really mean? Radicalisation is a word with a clear and specific etymology: “radical” comes from the Latin *radix* (root) and refers to seeking down to the roots. Radical political thought and radical political movements have been the driving force behind liberal reforms such as universal suffrage and the welfare state. In recent years, however, “radicalisation” has become the fixed correlate of the term “violent extremism”. The governments of Great Britain, the Netherlands and Norway have elected to conflate the two words in government White Papers. The Norwegian Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism states, for example, that: “Radicalisation is understood here to be a process whereby a person increasingly accepts the use of violence to achieve political, ideological or religious goals”. The consequent lack of precise concepts makes the field challenging, both as an object of research and as a focus for government endeavours to maintain safe, secure and cohesive societies. Most of our authors, however, have used the word “radicalisation” and have taken the status quo of that definition as their point of departure.

Combined, the chapters in this book contribute to a broad discussion of the concepts used to describe the underlying problems. What are the differences, and where are the lines between legitimate religious activism and radicalisation that can turn into violent extremism? How are people recruited into movements perceived to be radical? Should we with a broad stroke prescribe “national security issue” for all these recruitments? Which ones do we cultivate, which ones should we deter? What do people in these movements think of themselves, their religious ideologies and different strategies (non-violent and violent) to reach their goals? What can be done to help them out of dangerous, often suicidal trajectories? At the very least we hope that this anthology will help the reader to question the status of these concepts. Radicalisation coupled with alienation and marginalisation can become extremism, operating outside the democratic framework. Likewise, radical thought combined with inclusion and mobilisation can become activism, working within the democratic framework to address legitimate grievances and bring forth real liberal change.

Drawing on examples from a wide range of disciplines, fields and experiences, the authors explore the complexities of the realities in which they work. Bjørgo's conceptual discussion challenges the assumption that radicalisation is a linear process, as well as the inclination to take the relationship between ideas and behaviour or social relations for granted when we talk about radicalisation. Vestel points out that being radical is, in fact, a standard feature of youth in late modernity, stemming from youths' particular sensitivity to injustice and imbalanced power relations. Walker addresses the dynamic interplay between the (shifting) definition of the problem implied in the concepts radicalisation and extremism, the authorities' policy, and events, relations and institutions at the micro level.

Carlsson's chapter illustrates how the terms radicalisation (and extremism) conflate phenomena differing quite considerably in time, space and essence, by comparing right-wing extremism in local Norwegian communities a quarter of a century ago with today's global “Jihad”. Guribye and Grødum show how hard it can be to operationalise “radicalisation” and “radicalised” in our encounters with real people and real environments. Who are we talking about and to what extent does “our” understanding of “them” and their needs coincide with how they understand themselves? Bråten and Sønsterudbråten illustrate the same point regarding close relatives of assumed radicalised youth, the authorities' somehow misguided problem description and the accompanying failed preventive measures taken.

Hansen shows how complicated a radicalisation process can be and how dependent radical ideas in themselves can be on motivation, psychosocial factors, and not least context, in this case, prison. Lundesgaard and Krogh and DeMarinis bring in the importance of (mental) health, advocating a broader understanding of the phenomenon, with more focus on what lies beyond ideas and theology.

Aims

Our primary aim is to contribute new insights into violent extremism: how and why it arises and what to do about it. The superordinate objective is to disseminate this understanding both to policymakers, to transformative researchers and frontline workers in health, social services, justice, security, education and child welfare as well as the voluntary sector:

The people best placed to tackle the phenomenon of radicalisation are the so-called first-liners—people in direct contact with targeted individuals or vulnerable groups of the population. Across Europe, practitioners, researchers and NGOs have extensive knowledge on how to deal with this issue on the ground.

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), 9/9/2011

Such personnel are in a position to see and to act: they are well placed both to prevent incipient extremism and to rehabilitate: to help those who have been extremists to return to society and find a life worth living. For as Olivier Roy asks, “Why, for the past 20 years, have terrorists regularly chosen to die?” (Roy 2017)

Contents

The book opens with a prologue consisting of two insider perspectives. A brief personal narrative by Deeeyah Khan, filmmaker and UN advisor, on growing up as a member of the Pakistani community in Norway precedes a glimpse into a peak experience of violent extremism by Christian Picciolini, author and former Skinhead.

Khan and Picciolini come from two different worlds but have made parallel odysseys to meet in this preface. Khan’s documentary *White Right: Meeting the Enemy* (2018) deals with such meetings with wisdom and tolerance. Picciolini, who could have been one of those whom she met, returns at the end of the book with his moving story, “From neo-nazi skinhead to ‘former’: a narrative of disengagement”.

Part I

Understanding the Problem: Concepts, Theories and Models

We begin with a set of chapters that provide a look at different ways of framing the challenge. The concepts, theories and models move between macro-level, national and international perspectives from the fields of security, religion and economics.

Tore Bjørge argues the benefits of conceptually separating what are indeed different processes involved when an individual exits an extremist engagement. The first of these, disengagement, refers to changes in behaviour and affiliations. The frequently used term de-radicalisation, he argues, should be reserved for changes in the realm of values and attitudes, where an individual distances himself from extremist ideology, and ceases to consider political violence legitimate. Disengagement and de-radicalisation, Bjørge maintains, do not necessarily coincide, nor is there a direct causal link between them. All preventive work should account for this. By clearly distinguishing between these two processes, Bjørge also indirectly challenges the often-assumed association between ideas and action in discussions of extremism.

Viggo Vestel argues in his chapter for the advantages of viewing the phenomenon against the backdrop of youth as a liminoid life phase, drawing on Victor Turner's noted conceptualisation. As part of its liminality, vulnerability categorises adolescence in multiple aspects, including its distinctive sensibility for power relations and injustice. From his perspective, both right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism can be understood as forms of late modern youth rebellion, driven at once by processes and events at the global macro-level, such as the war on terror and immigration, and at the individual level, such as bullying, or a quest for meaning and purpose.

LeRon Shults addresses the question: "can we predict and prevent religious radicalisation?" He reviews up-to-date research and introduces state of the art computational methods for use in this field. By addressing what role (if any) religion can play on a micro, meso and macro level, Shults identifies how sacred values may influence attitudes and decision-making. Scientific tools like computer modelling and simulations may help us to predict the likelihood of religious radicalisation and violent extremism in different demographic and geographical areas. Such devices have potential implications for the development of more effective policies and preventive measures.

Jitka Doležalová and Hana Fitzová explore, in their innovative chapter, how the economic upheavals that started with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 and culminated in a meltdown of the world economic order affected the fringe far-right and far-left parties. The perception is that taxpayer-financed bailout and austerity measures that governments used to reduce budget deficits by implementing spending cuts and tax increases seem to have saved “Wall Street” at the cost of “Main Street”. This chapter shows by quantified empirical data how and whether economic downturn and political alienation have corroborated the rise of a polarised political landscape.

Part II

Understanding the Problem: Case Studies

The next part of the book focuses on case studies in a broad sense, and on youth, in particular, as a vulnerable life phase.

Rob Faure Walker discusses his experiences in teaching Muslim students while noting the impacts of the UK governments PREVENT Counter-Terrorism Strategy in the classroom and his relationships with his students. A shift in the UK counter-terrorism strategy from violence and onto a broad focus on “radicalisation” and “extremism” had very observable—and unfortunate—effects on his students. Discussions in the classroom, previously lively and fruitful for confronting problematic or intolerant views, were silenced. Students ceased to seek support from adults as they had formerly done. Also, theological discussions and practice amongst Muslim students became less open, leaving them more vulnerable to extremist propaganda.

David Hansen’s chapter discusses in depth the trajectory of a (former) inmate into and out of a form of radical Islam while incarcerated in Norwegian prisons. Exploring this unique story, Hansen sheds light on the complexities and nuances of the interplay between incarceration and processes of radicalisation and extremism, arguing that although they have been known to be incubators for violent extremism/terrorism, prisons can also provide a suitable context for positive transformation. In the case presented in the chapter, a de-radicalisation process supported by “informed Islam” proves successful. This finding suggests that the availability of trained religious leaders may be crucial to minimising the risk of extremist inmates taking the role of spiritual guides, taking advantage of and even leading into violent radicalisation more vulnerable inmates.

Kennedy Amone-P'Olak describes the recruitment and indoctrination of children in Northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA deliberately and strategically targeted, abducted, radicalised, and indoctrinated vulnerable children and forced them to perpetrate violence against the civilian population. Mechanisms such as rituals, secrecy and mysticism, sexual enslavement, horrific public violence, and propaganda, all carefully executed to produce maximum psychological effects on both the perpetrators and victims, intended to sever the bond between the children, parents and communities and to reconfigure the children's characters to conform to LRA values, aspirations, and ideology. Knowledge of the processes, the mental health consequences, and potential behavioural and identity changes are critical for designing effective interventions for reintegration of survivors into their communities.

Anders Lundesgaard and Kai Krogh connect the dots between childhood trauma and violent extremism. As mental health specialists, they promote mental health as a fruitful approach to understanding and preventing extremism. These authors challenge what they see as something of a blind spot in the literature: the effect of childhood trauma on trajectories into violent extremism later in life. They illustrate their case with the story of a young refugee in Norway, subjected to a series of traumatic events as a child, who later became an ISIS fighter in Syria. In a review of the literature, Lundesgaard and Krogh argue that such traumatic experiences may create vulnerability to extremism. Such an insight, they contend, should to a far more considerable extent inform prevention policies, making the prevention of childhood trauma and the reduction of its effects a crucial part of preventing violent extremism.

Howard Bath puts it this way:

Early traumatic experiences may distort normal developmental processes (such as the adolescent phase of identity formation) and the universal needs for attachment/belonging, achievement/mastery, autonomy/power and altruism/purpose (Howard Bath, E-mail message to the editors, June 2, 2017).

Part III

Addressing the problem: policies

Part III focuses on the role of government policy and its possible consequences for preventing—or contributing to—the development of extremism in their nations and between nations. What policies are most effective in, for example: providing peace, justice and reconciliation after

international conflict; proscribing processes of exclusion and challenges to mental health in schools; preventing hate crime and hate speech; helping parents to help their rootless teenagers?

Roy Gutman received a Pulitzer Prize for his disclosure of conditions in the Serbian concentration camps during the Balkan war, which facilitated the work of the European Human Rights Tribunal in Strasbourg (Hanne Sofie Greve, personal communication 1999). In his chapter, he presents a journalist's perspective on the origins of extremism in the vacuum created in failed states in the aftermath of war. He makes a case for the restoration of belief in and recourse to Humanitarian Law, which sadly has appeared to decline in recent decades.

Yngve Carlsson's chapter on the role of Norwegian municipalities in the prevention of violent extremism grew out of research on dismantling local right-wing groups in southern Norway a quarter of a century ago. He compares processes of right-wing radicalisation and prevention with extremism and prevention related to present day global Jihadism, and argues that local authorities find preventing Islamic extremism a far more complex and challenging task. It is inadequate to uncritically adopt the municipality-based methods that worked well in the past with local teenagers. At the same time, the municipality has to be a principal actor, seeking solutions through its primary roles in the local community. Among these solutions, there is hope for a sharpened attention to the situation of child and adolescent refugees in the future.

Katrine Fangen and Nina Høy-Petersen trace the legislative journey of hate crime from the Afro-American fight for equal civil rights in the 1950s all the way to their case in point—the Norwegian hate crime legislation of 2015. The chapter aptly situates the Norwegian law among critical international debates on the topic, addressing hate crime as a potential contributing factor regarding societal instability, policy and political discourse. The authors argue that, since hate crime policies are divergent across the globe, the outcomes they generate are likely to be somewhat diverse and conflicting.

Valerie DeMarinis argues the benefits of using a public mental health framework in governmental efforts to combat violent extremism. Such a frame includes both relevant disciplines (psychiatry, psychology, sociology, communications, education, and public policy) and appropriate approaches: developing and implementing community-based programs and services, conducting research and evaluation and recommending policies. A public health framework has the advantage of more efficiently mobilising resources and coordinating different measures and methods systematically, with well-established evaluation processes and feedback

channels. According to DeMarinis, public mental health promotion thus facilitates a better understanding and a more efficient approach to the complexity of violent extremism.

In other parts of the world, a public health metaphor informs the development of preventive measures to combat the extremism epidemic. By treating it as an “infection” in local hotspots, restorative measures can reach youths and their families in villages and towns in, for example, Tunisia, the most significant producer of foreign fighters in the world (Roig and Mrad, 2017).

Beret Bråten and Silje Sønsterudbråten’s chapter discusses “lessons learned” from one of the preventive measures of the Norwegian governmental action plan against radicalisation and violent extremism. A pilot project offered parental guidance courses to parents who were “concerned for their children in connection with radicalisation and violent extremism”. This intervention has been deemed less than successful, mainly due to significant difficulties in recruiting such parents to the project. Bråten and Sønsterudbråten point out how in this case, the map, i.e. the preventive measure, has little to do with the terrain, i.e. the parent’s experiences and perceived needs related to the problem.

Part IV

Addressing the Problem: Psychosocial Interventions

In the next part, the focus is on care and rehabilitation—whether the person in question has been or is in danger of becoming an extremist, either inside or outside of a prison.

Preben Berthelsen’s chapter offers a comprehensive and detailed overview of the internationally recognised program he has developed for the training and use of mentors in Aarhus, Denmark. The program aims at transforming the lives of individuals associated with, or drifting towards, extremist groups or extreme action. Bertelsen’s LTG (the Life Psychological Goal-setting Tool) not only provides concrete measures aimed at radicalised individuals. It also provides a more holistic understanding of both the value of the individual and how to aid the individuals in question in finding a life that is “good enough” to be worth living. In Bertelsen’s words, the mentor needs “to work with empowerment, and to build general human capabilities for comprehending and managing life challenges in a meaningful way that is not illegal, violent, or life-threatening”. To realise such goals, prevention programs need to provide structures that will facilitate processes of change and give

support in new experiences, so that these may promote new directions for the individual in his or her life.

Eva Entenmann, Liesbeth van der Heide, Daan Weggemans and Jessica Dorsey write about the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign fighters, with a focus on the criminal justice sector. Who are foreign fighters and what is the criminal justice sector's response to them? The authors outline the main contours of rehabilitation programmes for violent extremist offenders and the benefits of rehabilitation for this group as well as challenges for incorporating it. Finally, the chapter provides reflections and recommendations for using rehabilitation in the criminal justice sector response in dealing with foreign fighters.

Eugene Guribye and Kjetil Grødum examine recruitment issues in work to prevent radicalisation among immigrant youth, in a local preventive youth project intended to combat Islamic radicalisation in a Norwegian town. The project encountered significant recruitment issues in identifying the target group and motivating eligible individuals to participate. It was also hard to keep the participants within the project. Concerning the recruitment challenges of this particular project, which resonated profoundly with those of other similar projects, the authors argue the inherent risks related to such preventive measure. There is a risk of stigmatisation, a further drift into social exclusion—with extremism as one of the possible destinations—and on a more general societal level, distrust between groups and general demoralisation.

Murray Robinson seeks to answer the question: what are the essential differences in practice between retributive justice in authoritarian systems and restorative justice in systems where young offenders are both seen and heard by their “helpers”? Based on his study tour of three American youth detention centres with low recidivism rates, Robinson lays out the nuts and bolts of successful preventive work in youth detention, by describing how to implement trauma informed approaches. His purpose is not to compare or analyse the systems, which share the humanist value orientation of Trauma Informed Care and Practice (Bath, 2008), but to observe, record and report how to use the models in practice. His findings are currently contributing to new thinking in Victoria youth detention, Australia.

Part V

Signs of Hope

The book closes on a hopeful note.

Christian Picciolini, the former leader of a Chicago based neo-Nazi skinhead group, provides a personal, yet compelling glimpse into the

essence of the phenomenon addressed in this book. It's an essential reminder of the fact that violent radicalisation, at least in a Western context, has much to do with a shared human vulnerability and basic human needs like identity, belonging and a sense of purpose in life. Now the reformed violent extremist runs a non-profit organisation called Life After Hate. What can be drawn from Picciolini's story, and from the preventive measures of his organisation? If we confuse fear with power and ideology with cultural identity, then we risk legitimising the collective identity of "the other" based on a polarised worldview.

Since the beginning of the peace process for Palestine and Israel, the political leadership on both sides have operated under the assumption that religious and existential issues were unsolvable, and that a diplomatic compromise is only possible through a dialogue of interests. Religion was considered an obstacle to peace.

Rabbi Michael Melchior has the final word. As co-president of the Religious Peace Initiative with the late Sheik Abdullah Nimr Darwish, Rabbi Melchior presented an opposing view in a powerful appeal to the 600 participants at the Network of Strong Cities in the City of Aarhus, Denmark in 2017. "On the contrary", he said; "peace is the core value of these religions—it comes from within them". In the Religious Peace Initiative, leaders of the three Abrahamic religions work together across faiths, acknowledging that they are each responsible for their shared fate. In his chapter, entitled "Opening the Tent of Peace," we present a transcription of his speech.

The study of the phenomena with which this eclectic volume deals is not new.

In the early 20th century, Max Weber described new religious movements as forms of social revolution, attempts to bring about a break in an established order. Breaking through requires belief and a readiness to offer one's resources in the service of an idea—as is the case, for example, with religious radicalisation. An individual or group takes responsibility for announcing a break in an established normative order—and declares its legitimacy (Weber 1922/ 1991 xliii). There must be someone who behaves prophetically, proclaiming the kingdom of God, the Caliphate, the Jihad, the direct route to heaven, and gathers people around him who accept this goal as legitimate. Al Baghdadi did this in June 2014, and Pope Urban II did the same in June 1095 when he called upon all Christian men to free the Holy Land from the Infidel. These socio-religious revolutionary tides

are a recurring phenomenon: how the outside world reacts is pivotal in defining the outcome.

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PROLOGUE

I PICKED UP A CAMERA— THEY PICKED UP A GUN

DEEYAH KHAN

Growing up between cultures can lead young Muslims to feel isolated and detached. These feelings can turn into the aggressive identity politics of Islamism. Yet, growing up between cultures can also provide a vantage point from which to build inclusive societies.

As a teenager with an active singing career in Norway, I was harassed and attacked by Islamists and forced into exile abroad, far from my family, my home and everything I had ever known. Driven by their belief that women performers were an insult to their stern god, these men with beards claimed to be enacting his will when they sprayed burning chemicals into my face at my own concert. At that time, the issue of Islamic radicalisation was barely on the radar of mainstream politics. A young, brown-skinned music artist forced out of her country by extremists barely caused a ripple in the media. Then, few people outside our communities were aware of the distinctions between my parents' Islam and the virulent, violent strains of Islamism that had been spreading across the Muslim world and its diaspora for decades.

After I had left Norway, the problem of radicalisation became visible outside our communities, through events such as 9/11 and its disastrous fallout. Although radicalisation was now on the radar, I felt we often misunderstood it. I decided to film the documentary *Jihad*, which explored the experiences of men, and women, who had been part of Islamist extremist movements. One of the first barriers I needed to overcome to conduct these interviews was my fear. I realised that I would be talking to people who had been part of a movement that had once terrorised me. But this barrier turned out to be far easier to pass than I had expected: in fact, I felt a surprising sense of familiarity in hearing their stories: of controlling communities and families, of dealing with culture clash, and encounters with prejudice.

Those of us who are children of Muslim parents and have grown up in Western nations have many of these experiences in common. Few of us have escaped racism in our lives, whether expressed through the blatant

jeers on the street, or the subtler indications of negative expectations and stereotyping by people who would never consider themselves prejudiced. Few of us have been untouched by the effects of the South Asian and Arab family structures—the insistence upon maintaining close relations with the extended family, and the pressures of keeping up appearances for the community. Keeping up appearances weighs particularly heavily upon women, considered to represent family “honour”. Many of us have developed a complicated, ambivalent relationship with our parents’ religion, from those who leave Islam entirely to those who follow radical and reinvented forms of their faith. But the sense of familiarity that I felt with these former extremists went beyond recognising our shared, and often complicated, experiences of growing up brown and Muslim in a white Christian/secular world. My own experiences, as a South Asian woman, had, in a sense, radicalised me, after all. Every attack upon me strengthened my belief in freedom of expression, feminism, equality and human rights. Our endpoints might have been miles apart, but our trajectories were similar in a way.

The extremists and former extremists that I spoke to were dealing with problems with their families and their encounters with racism and were engaged in the broader search for a sense of identity and meaning in the spaces between their parents’ culture and expectations, and those of the more general society. Young Muslims are not the only people to grow up with these complicated feelings of not belonging: but few other groups have such an organised and a systematic machine designed to convert angst into extremism. Islamist movements promoted narratives of suffering Muslims, simplifying complicated geopolitics into them and us, right and wrong, Islam vs the world. These movements invited young people to identify their issues with a broader political phenomenon: the position of Muslims in the world, and the effects of flawed and often arrogant Western policies. They presented a distorted picture, which was given emotive weight by the real prejudice and discrimination they had experienced themselves in their own lives. If people feel themselves to be lost and confused, they are likely to believe anyone who claims to show them a way out of confusion.

Islamist organisations also sold a sense of community, drawing people into a new, “third-cultural space” where a young man who was unable to get a job or move out of his parents’ home could get status through his piety. Young men and women could stop seeing themselves as losers, but instead as holy pioneers, creating a shining future following God’s plan. The sense of belonging and community within movements provided gratification; the feeling of being part of creating a new world order

provided a sense of supremacy for people used to seeing themselves as outsiders, as failures.

I am a firm believer in the power of communication. The main difference between the Jihadists that I interviewed and me was not just ideological: it was also our methods. I had picked up a camera to explore my concerns, while they had picked up guns. If we are to reduce the threat of terrorism, then we have to challenge the Islamist framing and disrupt the mechanisms of recruitment. But we also have to find ways of engaging with young people who feel excluded, of building a politics of solidarity that challenges reductive and exclusive identity politics, and instead find a way of creating relationships between people regardless of their differences. It is never helpful for young people to see themselves as outsiders and failures. The positive, pro-social drives that can draw people towards extremism—the rage against injustice, the desire to work for a better society—seemed to have no other outlet than the narrow and ugly identity politics of Islamism. This energy could redirect towards challenging injustice non-violently and working for a society that is better for everyone, not just those who are part of an elect group.

For too long we have been putting people in boxes of culture and faith when we need to build communities that are inclusive, tolerant and diverse. Positions between cultures may lead to a sense of disengagement if they come laden with negative experiences and emotions that can lead people to find pseudo-families and communities within extremist movements. But being between cultures can also provide a vantage point to survey the similarities and differences between cultures, and to challenge reductive them-and-us narratives.

Being “between cultures” need not be a dilemma: it can be an opportunity, a place where we can dismantle stereotypes, engage empathically with other people, and find points of connection that go beyond limited ideas of culture. Being “between cultures” reminds us that everyone has multiple identities and that none of these comprises the whole of a human being. To dismantle these “we and them” narratives, we need to rediscover a shared sense of humanity. To rediscover this means putting aside some of our prejudices, and acknowledging some of our failings—on both sides—and coming together in the spirit of honest and open communication to ask, in what kind of society do we want to live?

I want to live in a society with more cameras, more pens, more paintbrushes, more microphones: more communication. Not more guns.

FROM A STAGE IN WEIMAR

CHRISTIAN PICCIOLINI¹

At eighteen, I stood on stage in a cathedral in Germany, cries of “Heil Hitler!” punctuating the roar of thousands of European skinheads shouting my name. At that moment, I was responsible for the electricity in the air, the adrenaline coursing through throbbing veins, the sweat pouring down shaved heads.

Absolute devotion to white power pulsed through the crowd on that foggy March evening in 1992. I imagined then that this must have been how Hitler felt when he led his armies on his mission to dominate the world.

I’d talked about how laws favouring blacks were taking white jobs, and how we paid for the taxes used to support welfare programs. I believed that minorities and their drugs were overrunning neighbourhoods of law-abiding, hard-working white families. Gays—a threat to the propagation of our species—were demanding individual rights. Minorities were conning our women into relationships.

I had learned to believe that the white race was in peril.

¹ See the rest of Picciolini’s story at the end of the book: “From Neo-Nazi Skinhead to ‘Former’—A Narrative of Disengagement”

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PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: CONCEPTS, THEORIES AND MODELS

CHAPTER ONE

DISENGAGEMENT FROM TERRORISM

TORE BJØRGO¹

Introduction

The ultimate way to prevent terrorism and violent extremism is to facilitate disengagement. At the collective level, this means that entire militant groups stop using violence in their political struggle—ending their terrorist campaigns or giving up their strategies of violence to further political goals. At the individual level, disengagement means that individual activists end their involvement with militant groups and activities, usually by leaving the group or distancing themselves from the use of political violence. The desired outcome of such a process is that the use of force ceases or decreases. Meanwhile, knowledge of how these processes occur is necessary to be able to develop result-oriented prevention measures based on this mechanism.

Thus, in this context, the notion of “disengagement” refers to a change in behaviour and involvement. It is often confused with the often too broadly used term “de-radicalisation”. The latter term should describe a change in values and attitudes, in the sense of no longer embracing radical or violent ideologies and policies, and no longer considering violence to be a legitimate way to further a political cause (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009: 3-5; Horgan 2009: 27–28). This conceptual distinction between de-radicalisation and disengagement is essential because the connection between changes in attitudes and behaviour is not as straightforward and linear as often assumed. Values and ideas may or may not change when individuals disengage (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009: 3–5). These are to some extent separate or loosely linked processes, and one does not necessarily

¹ Previous versions of this chapter appear in Tore Bjørgo (2013) *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, chapter 10), and Tore Bjørgo (2016) *Preventing Crime: A Holistic Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, chapter 6).

depend on or lead to the other. Some individuals and groups may first de-radicalise, in the sense of no longer believing that violence is right, and then as a consequence, end their involvement in violent activism. However, in reality, the processes of de-radicalisation and disengagement do not often follow this sequence. Some individuals and militant groups may be disillusioned about the use of violence to further their political cause but are stuck and see no way out of the conflict or the group, and have to continue their violent struggle. They are de-radicalised but not disengaged. Others end their involvement in violent activism, voluntarily or involuntarily (e.g. by being imprisoned), but they may still have extreme attitudes and believe that using violence for a political cause is justified and legitimate. They are disengaged but not de-radicalised. They may or may not re-engage in violent activism at a later point in time, or they may change their involvement from an extreme to a non-violent role within the same militant movement (e.g. as recruiters, propagandists, etc.). Furthermore, some disengage from the militant group—more or less voluntary—but initially retain a belief in the legitimacy of the cause; but then they gradually de-radicalise as time moves on and they are no longer under the influence of the group.

This distinction between de-radicalisation and disengagement has relevance for policy and practice. It raises the question of what should be the most important goal of a strategy aimed at getting terrorists and other political extremists to quit: that they change their behaviour or that they change their mindset. Many so-called de-radicalisation programmes have very unclearly defined goals, and it is thus difficult to evaluate their effectiveness.

Collective and Individual Disengagement

The prevailing belief has been that “once a terrorist, always a terrorist”, and that the only way to get them to cease their terror activities is through physical incapacitation: imprisonment or death. Recent research shows that terrorist careers and campaigns end in many ways and for many reasons (Cronin 2008; Jones and Libicki 2008; Bjørgo and Horgan 2009). Some, of course, come to an end because the terrorists are killed or imprisoned for a long time, but many give up terrorism because they choose to do so—more or less voluntarily. The goal must be to get more to quit earlier rather than later before they have time to inflict suffering on others and before they have blood on their hands. Interrupting a radicalisation process early on in a terrorist career is better than waiting until the person or group concerned has managed to do a great deal of harm. It is useful to differentiate between an individual end to a terrorist

career, and a collective term to a terror campaign or group. The reason is that the measures employed to achieve this can be somewhat different. Again, the notion of macro, meso and micro level factors and processes may guide our understanding of how and why terrorists disengage, collectively or individually.

The most effective way of preventing terroristic violence in the long term is to get entire terrorist groups to lay down their arms. Such an outcome has arisen in several different ways, caused by factors and processes at different levels. One striking example of how developments at the macro level precipitated the demise of a terrorist organisation relates to the left-wing Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany. The remaining RAF activists at large announced in April 1998 that “The urban guerrilla in the shape of the RAF is now history”. The background factors were the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ideological bankruptcy of the communist model as well as the collapse of the DDR, and its subsequent reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany.² At the time of the announcement, it was five years since the RAF had launched a major attack, in March 1993.

After German reunification in 1990, it became known that RAF members had received shelter and new identities in the DDR and that the Stasi security and intelligence organisation had provided RAF with training, logistical and financial support (Sørensen 2006).

Several factors at national as well as group levels led to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, in which the IRA and the Protestant paramilitary groups laid down their arms and eventually verifiably decommissioned them.³ In Egypt, the two most significant Islamist terror organisations, The Islamic Group and Jihad, ended their terror campaigns after the leaders of the two organisations realised their violent struggle was the wrong path. These leaders have provided comprehensive theological justifications for this to persuade their followers (a process at meso level, see below).

Some groups give up terrorism by admitting defeat (e.g. the Red Army

² *RAF-Auflösungserklärung*. <http://www.rafinfo.de/archiv/raf/raf-20-4-98.php> [Accessed 22 November 2017]. At the time of the announcement, it was five years since the RAF had launched a major attack, in March 1993.

³ These factors include a redefinition of traditional Irish nationalism, growing political isolation of the IRA and Sinn Fein, and a realisation among the leadership that they lacked the strength to achieve the end goal (Alonso 2009: 98). The IRA also realised that their organisation was infiltrated at all levels by British intelligence. The determination of the British and Irish governments to push together for a political settlement was crucial. See also English (2009: 132).

Faction in Germany and the Islamic Group in Egypt). Some give it up because their leaders are arrested (Aum Shinrikyo in Japan and Shining Path in Peru) or because they lose popular support (Red Brigades in Italy during the years after the killing of Prime Minister Aldo Moro). Others end their armed struggle through negotiations and peace agreements (IRA, Fatah/PLO). In some cases, groups that have previously used terroristic methods come to power (FLN in Algeria, Fatah, ANC in South Africa) (cf. Hoffman 2006; Cronin 2008; Crenshaw 1991). A study of how long terror groups remain active (LaFree 2011) shows that almost 75 percent are no longer active one year after their first attack, while only 6 percent of groups are active for more than ten years. Another study that looked at how terror groups give up terrorism (Jones and Libicki 2008) showed that 47 percent of the terror groups in their research gave up using terroristic means because police, intelligence or military forces defeated them. More surprisingly, no less than 43 percent gave up terrorism because they became participants in a political process. Typically, giving up terrorist methods involves a gradual process rather than a sudden halt. Ten percent of the groups gave up terrorism because their campaign ended in the form of victory (mainly anti-colonialist movements). Meanwhile, other studies (including Cronin 2008) show that many groups also disintegrate through internal splits or disappear because of a lack of popular support, disillusionment among their members or weak leadership.

The two major Egyptian terror organisations Gama'a al-Islamiya (The Islamic Group) and Jihad provide an interesting example of how terror organisations can break with terrorism due to their leaders and ideologists becoming disillusioned and changing their ideology. Authorities imprisoned most of their leaders (and tens of thousands of members) for a long time (many of them from the 1980s or earlier). After a while, the leadership realised that their violent struggle had done more harm than good to their cause. From the end of the 1990s onwards, the leaders began to gradually revise their understanding of what the Qur'an and theological tradition say about Jihad, and have in recent years strongly denounced al-Qaida's ideology and terroristic practices. Some of these individuals were among the principal ideologues and leaders in al-Qaida's early phase (see Rashwan 2009, especially pp. 128–129). Such ideological criticism from their own has shaken al-Qaida and forced members to defend their ideological point of view (Wright 2008). Since 1997 and up to the time of writing no acts of terrorism have been carried out by these two organisations in Egypt, and thousands of imprisoned former extremists have now left prison (Blaydes and Rubin 2008; Wright 2008; Rashwan 2009).

In addition to this collective way of disengaging from terrorism, many individuals involved in terrorism also disengage on their own initiative. Members of terror groups leave in different ways and for various reasons, though disillusionment usually plays a vital role in the process. Different types of activists tend to become disillusioned for different reasons.⁴

Political idealism and altruism motivated those who to begin with are more disposed to losing their illusions because they realise there is a contradiction between the means and the ends, or that the violent actions go too far and harm innocent people. These ideological activists often also realise that their struggle is not improving the situation of those for whom they claim to be fighting and that it is often those who are most harmed by the violent acts. Fellow travellers who primarily joined the militant group out of loyalty to friends or a desire to belong to a group will often become disillusioned because the comrades, group and leaders do not live up to their high expectations—in other words, mainly because of factors and processes at the meso and micro levels. They become disappointed if paranoia about possible infiltrators poisons relationships in the group, or if the leaders try to manipulate them into joining in actions when they do not wish to. Such people are often disposed to defecting to another strong group and forming bonds with alternative friends. Many people also leave a group because they have found a girlfriend/boyfriend or had a child, meaning their priorities in life change. They long for mainstream life and end up burnt out and exhausted from the pressure and stress of underground activism. The socially frustrated and marginalised have limited social resources and weak ties with normal society. They are often interested in excitement and action, and can quickly become bored with the endless waiting and preparations for an operation that may be far into the future. If they leave the extremist group, they can easily slide into other criminal circles. Others quit after being arrested. For some, this means they are no longer subject to the group's negative influence—meaning their worldview unravels and they reorient themselves. And those adventurers who joined militant extremism for the excitement may find that life in a terrorist group may be rather dull, with endless waiting and dreary tasks. Alternatively, they may get an overdose when they see their best friend screaming on the ground with his guts all over the place (Jamieson 1990; Horgan 2003; Bjørge 2009; Bjørge 2011).

Both “push” and “pull” mechanisms, or forces, influence the outcome

⁴ In an earlier work (Bjørge 2011), I identified and discussed three general types of participants in militant extremist groups: the ideological activists, the drifters and followers, and the socially frustrated youths. In later works (Bjørge & Gjelsvik 2016, Bjørge 2016), I have added a fourth type, the adventurers.