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NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER

~~(U//FOUO)~~ TURNING POINTS IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST DISENGAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FOR COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

NCTC SPECIAL ANALYSIS REPORT 2014-1404a
9 July 2014



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~~(U)~~ Key Findings

~~(U//FOUO)~~ A study of how and why individuals disengage from violent movements concludes that tailored approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE) can help facilitate the disengagement process. Building on an existing academic model of the disengagement process, we conducted a comparative case study analysis of former violent extremists.

- ~~(U//FOUO)~~ According to the applied model, an individual disengaging from violent extremism typically goes through five stages during the disengagement process, from harboring initial doubts to seeking out and weighing alternatives to making a decision to leave a group. Once such a decision is made, the individual needs to exit the group, define new behaviors and roles, and become resocialized.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ CVE efforts will be most effective after an individual experiences initial doubts about involvement in violent extremist activities. From that point in the process, an effective disengagement strategy needs to consider the individual's role within the group, vulnerabilities in that role, support system, and level of commitment to violent extremism.

- ~~(U//FOUO)~~ The perception of law enforcement pressure—both on the violent extremist and on his or her peers—is an effective catalyst for sparking disengagement. Continued lawful pressure, monitoring, and support from nonviolent individuals are required to sustain long-term disengagement.
- ~~(U//FOUO)~~ Family members and close friends who support loved ones in giving up violent extremism are among the most effective resources for encouraging disengagement and helping individuals establish nonviolent roles.

(U) Scope Note

(U//~~FOUO~~) This study applies a structured analytic technique that builds on a model developed by academics studying terrorism and terrorist disengagement overseas to examine the process of homegrown violent extremist (HVE) disengagement from violence. A better understanding of how and why HVEs disengage offers new insights for countering violent extremism (CVE) programs—in particular, how they can be tailored to have an impact on the disengagement process. This paper focuses on *disengagement* more than on *deradicalization*.

- (U) The change theory model applied in this paper^a hypothesizes that disengagement is a five-stage process of changing attitudes, behavior, and identity. *Disengagement* refers to the process by which an individual ceases violent extremist behavior and moves away from opportunities to participate in or support violence.¹ Because of this emphasis on behavior change, a disengaged person may

still hold radical beliefs despite no longer being involved in violent extremist activities.²

- (U) *Deradicalization* refers to a fundamental change in the belief structures supporting commitment to a violent ideology. It focuses on attitude more than behavior, although it implies an accompanying change in engagement in violent activity.³

(U//~~FOUO~~) With the model as a point of departure, we examined open-source information on former leftwing and rightwing extremists, violent jihadists, and gang members to identify key turning points in the disengagement process. This work was supplemented by academic research on the psychology of terrorism and role change.

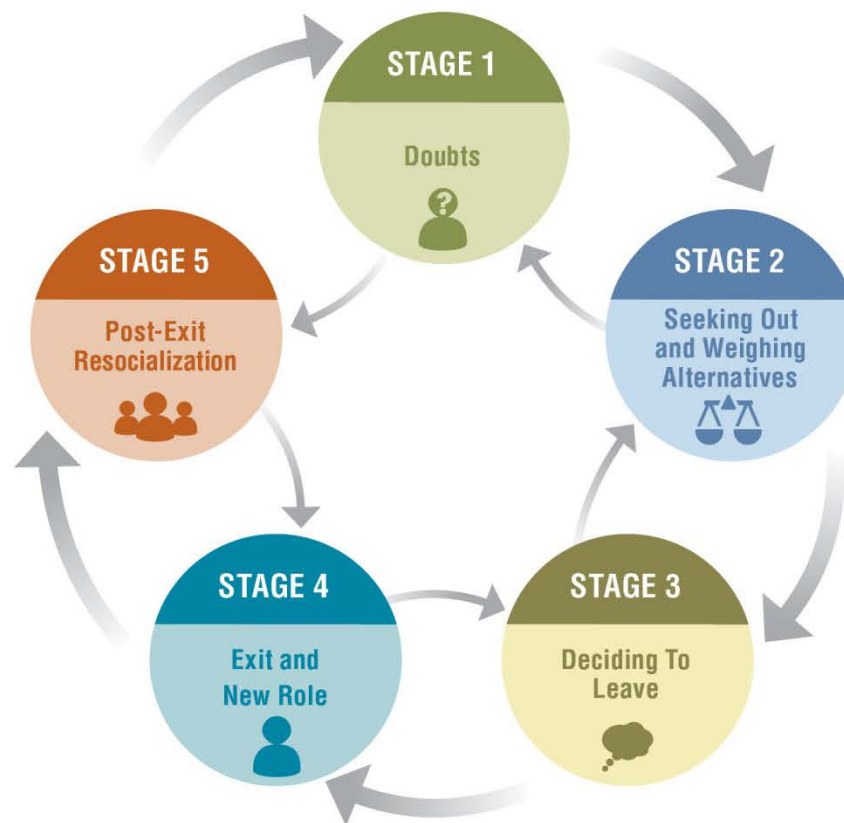
(U//~~FOUO~~) This study follows the radicalization and mobilization process descriptions outlined in NCTC's (U//~~FOUO~~) *Radicalization Dynamics: A Primer*, 2010.

^a (U) See *The Disengagement Process*, International Center for the Study of Terrorism, 2012.

(U) Process of Violent Extremist Disengagement



(U//~~FOUO~~) This model, developed by behavioral researchers studying disengagement from violent extremism, describes disengagement as a complex process in which an individual may proceed from 1) having initial doubts about his or her involvement in violent extremism, to 2) seeking and weighing alternatives, to 3) deciding to leave, to 4) exiting and establishing a new role in society, and eventually to 5) resocializing into society.¹ This process is driven by a number of factors—societal, organizational, social, and personal—and an individual may take any length of time to progress through each stage, may remain at any one stage for a length of time, and may move back and forth between each stage before proceeding to the next.²



¹(U) Briefing, International Center for the Study of Terrorism, *Disengagement Case Study: Ahmed's Story*, September 2013

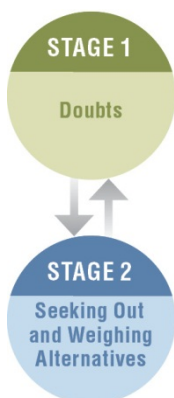
²(U) Briefing, International Center for the Study of Terrorism, *The Disengagement Process*, September 2013

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Turning Points in Violent Extremist Disengagement: Insights for Countering Violent Extremism

~~(U//FOUO)~~ To improve our understanding of how homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) disengage from involvement in terrorism, this study examines former violent extremists to discern common motivating factors and key turning points in the disengagement process. These factors can help increase the effectiveness of countering violent extremism (CVE) programs related to disengagement.

- ~~(U//FOUO)~~ The cases include rightwing and leftwing violent extremists, violent jihadists, and gang members and were examined according to academic research in psychological change theory regarding role change.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ According to the model, an individual disengaging from violent extremism typically goes through five stages, from harboring initial doubts to seeking out and weighing alternatives to making a decision to leave a group. Once such a decision is made, an individual needs to exit the group, define new behaviors and roles, and become resocialized.⁴



~~(U//FOUO)~~ Common Catalysts for Initial Doubts

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Among former violent extremists who have disengaged, cognitive dissonance—the disconnect between what the individual envisioned to be a violent

extremist’s role and what actually occurs—was the most common catalyst for doubts leading to disengagement, a finding consistent with the current academic literature on terrorist disengagement.⁵⁶⁷

Violent extremists experienced cognitive dissonance as a result of witnessing violence that they objected to, seeing inconsistencies in the ideology and practices of the group, feeling burned out or underappreciated by the group, or feeling threatened by law enforcement interest in themselves or in a close associate.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Objection to Violence

~~(U//FOUO)~~ This factor was the most common spark for initial doubts about involvement in violent extremism. Individuals observed extreme violence against innocents in the name of the violent extremist group, grew tired of carrying out violence against others, or came to believe violence was not the most effective method to achieve the group’s goals.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Recognizing Inconsistencies in Ideology

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Some individuals experienced cognitive dissonance after identifying inconsistencies in a group’s ideology or contradictions between the ideology and the day-to-day activities of the group. Often, individuals joined a group because they were attracted to its ideology, but over time, the group’s actions became increasingly inconsistent with its original message,

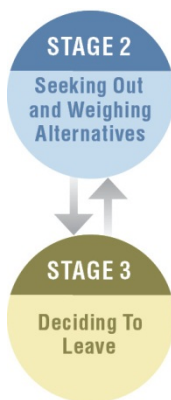
prompting some violent extremists to begin disengaging.

(U) Feeling Burned Out or Exhausted

(U//~~FOUO~~) Most violent extremists expressed feeling exhausted or burned out at many points throughout their involvement in violent extremism, some as a result of years of involvement, others because of the intensity of day-to-day activities. These feelings were reinforced through feedback from others who felt the same way and by encouragement from nonviolent friends, family members, and acquaintances aware of these feelings.

(U) Threat of Disruption or Prosecution

(U//~~FOUO~~) Violent extremists who realized they were under investigation or who witnessed close associates prosecuted for terrorism-related charges sometimes curbed their violent extremist activities or rhetoric to avoid further law enforcement scrutiny. In some cases, this realization led to a significant rethinking of their views; in other cases, it did not.



(U) Positive Feedback Facilitated Seeking Alternatives To Alleviate Internal Conflict

(U//~~FOUO~~) Violent extremists who experienced initial doubts and subsequently had experiences reinforcing those doubts were likely to continue the disengagement process by seeking and weighing alternatives to violent extremism. The more self-aware the individual was of his or her reasons for dissatisfaction and the more control he or she felt over leaving violent extremism, the shorter the deliberation stage. Individuals who perceived a lack of socially acceptable opportunities outside violent extremism or

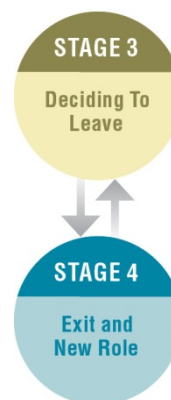
who felt they needed to stay involved in terrorism-related activities to survive spent more time engaged in violent extremism, probably because they saw few alternatives.

(U) Time in Prison Encouraged Transformation

(U//~~FOUO~~) While incarceration often reinforces an individual's commitment to violence—many violent extremists in the study initially became more committed to violence while incarcerated—some prison experiences facilitated violent extremists' eventual disengagement by providing an environment for contemplation and reflection.

(U) Group Disengagement Sped Exit Process

(U//~~FOUO~~) For some violent extremists, individual disengagement coincided with or immediately followed the group as a whole disengaging as a result of a collective decision, generally after most members left or were arrested. In these cases, individual disengagement was accelerated because the social structure of the group fell apart and the individual was forced to weigh alternatives.



(U) Decision To Leave Dependent on Perceived Support for Role Change and Commitment

(U//~~FOUO~~) Violent extremists who had their doubts reinforced and began to weigh the pros and cons of ending their involvement in violent extremism were more likely to disengage if they received positive social support for the role change and were able to consider life after their exit. The decision to disengage provides an individual the opportunity to reduce cognitive

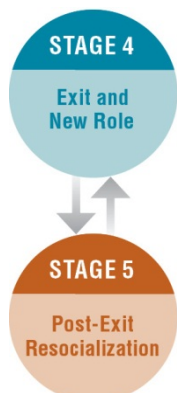
dissonance, announce the decision to others, and mobilize resources needed to exit.

(U) Opportunities for Change Influenced Speed of Deliberation

(U//~~FOUO~~) Violent extremists who had few nonviolent outlets proved most receptive to intervention from supportive friends, family members, or others, probably because they had less to lose by rejecting a violent extremist identity. Individuals who spent the most time deliberating the alternatives of staying involved often had multiple positive alternatives to violent extremism in their lives before becoming violent extremists. For them, disengagement meant they had more to rethink in terms of how they got there, what they had rejected along the way in adopting violent extremism, and what they stood to lose in rejecting their violent extremist identity.

(U) Prominence and Position Influenced Announcement To Leave Violent Extremism

(U//~~FOUO~~) The higher the position or more prominent the role an individual holds within a violent extremist group, the more likely he or she is to publicly announce an exit. These individuals probably feel a high degree of obligation or duty to the members of the group they led and feel they need to explain their decision to leave. Most lower level violent extremists usually do not make their exits public.



(U) Exit and Sustained Disengagement Required Learning New Identity

(U//~~FOUO~~) Often when individuals begin to disengage, they face opposition from former associates,

psychological distress, loss of social status, loss of purpose, and even death threats. Although many of the former violent extremists in this study expressed self-doubt and described their role change and resocialization as a lengthy, difficult, often lonely process, a number of personal, social, and societal factors helped sustain disengagement for these individuals.

(U) Exposure to “The Other”

(U//~~FOUO~~) Violent extremists who were exposed to “the other”—the perceived enemy of the violent extremist group—developed a more favorable view of this enemy if they had positive interactions. Although some individuals had interacted—at times violently—with their enemies before disengaging, violent extremists perceived later interactions with enemies as positive after they had decided to disengage.

(U) Positive, Understanding Family Members Key to Disengagement

(U//~~FOUO~~) Nearly all former violent extremists identified their families as central to encouraging their exit from violent extremism and to sustaining their disengagement, a finding consistent with the disengagement model.⁸ Family members can offer an understanding, supportive environment that reinforces an individual’s decision to leave violent extremism. They can also provide opportunities for an individual to adopt a new role, join a new social structure, apply for a job, and stay motivated to support the family.

(U) Education Facilitated Resocialization

(U//~~FOUO~~) After leaving violent extremism, individuals often sought new roles that required formal education or certification for a professional career. This pursuit allowed them to focus energy on something positive and demanded a significant amount of time,

helping to keep them away from their old lives.

(U) Professional Support Alleviated Stress Related to Disengaging

(U//~~FOUO~~) Psychotherapy and emotional support from social workers and probation officers provided outlets for some former violent extremists to address the often difficult life transitions and personal growth necessary to remain disengaged from violent extremism. After they left, these individuals faced increased risk for reengagement as they confronted new life stressors, but developing healthy coping mechanisms with the assistance of professionals helped some stay away from violent extremism.

(U) Complete Environment Change Necessary for Some

(U//~~FOUO~~) Some individuals with few positive alternatives to violent extremism after disengaging, sustained disengagement by completely removing themselves from the violent extremist environment. They ended relationships with violent extremists and formed new ones with nonviolent individuals, and they developed healthy, daily habits, such as exercise, prayer, and following a schedule.

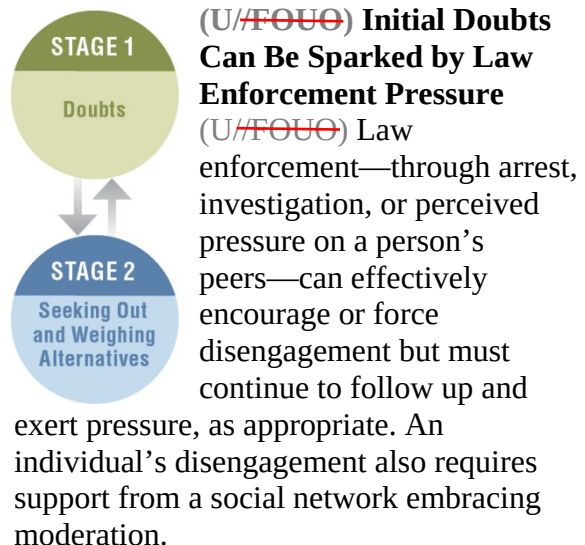
(U) Speaking Out Against Violent Extremism Part of Resocialization

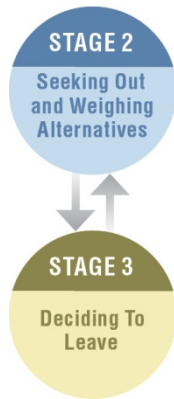
(U//~~FOUO~~) A desire to “right wrongs” by educating and warning the public about violent extremism and its causes helped sustain disengagement. These individuals alleviated their guilt and reconciled their violent extremist behavior by writing about their experiences so that others could learn from their example. Many went on to careers in CVE.

(U//~~FOUO~~) Implications for Strengthening CVE Efforts

(U//~~FOUO~~) CVE efforts aimed at promoting and sustaining disengagement are most likely to be effective in the middle and later stages of the disengagement process, serving to reinforce doubts and to help an individual rethink his or her commitment to violent extremism, develop healthy patterns of behavior, and sustain that commitment over time. These turning points in the disengagement process are where CVE efforts will probably be most effective, but any disengagement effort should be adapted to the individual violent extremist.

- (U//~~FOUO~~) To be effective, CVE programs need to have the flexibility to develop tailored plans that consider the role of the violent extremist within the group, the individual’s vulnerabilities in that role, his or her support system, and his or her level of commitment to violent extremism.

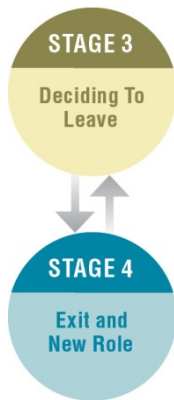




(U) Deliberating an Exit Can Be Supported by Family and Friends

(U//~~FOUO~~) To be most effective, CVE efforts need to engage family members and close friends of violent extremists throughout the disengagement process, since they are the people most

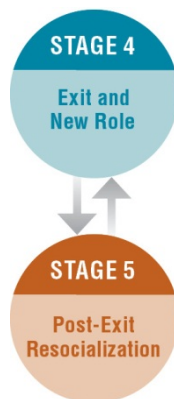
likely to encourage an individual to disengage and to sustain disengagement over time.



(U) New Nonviolent Role May Require New Environment

(U//~~FOUO~~) For some individuals, it may be easier to start over if they are placed in an environment away from their former violent extremist associates. Incorporating ways to facilitate such a removal while enabling the

individual to maintain close contact with a network of supportive friends and family would help strengthen CVE efforts.



(U//~~FOUO~~) Former Violent Extremists Can Resocialize To Support CVE Efforts

(U//~~FOUO~~) Some individuals may be persuaded to work on counterterrorism efforts to help reinforce their break with violent extremism. These former violent extremists can offer support to others as they disengage

from violent extremism and are more credible in speaking to the problems of both violent extremist groups and violent extremist ideology.

(U) CVE and Disengagement Resources

(U//~~FOUO~~) Law enforcement officers, correctional officers, and first responders can take advantage of a variety of resources on CVE training and programming and can review finished intelligence products for potential warning signs to promote situational awareness. These resources can be found on the Homeland Security Information Network and Law Enforcement Online.

- (U//~~FOUO~~) NCTC maintains the Community Engagement Online Resource Center, which facilitates CVE coordination between federal, state, local, and tribal community engagement practitioners and law enforcement officers. This site contains CVE case studies, videos, and presentations to share with community groups during CVE efforts.
- (U//~~FOUO~~) DHS, FBI, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police maintain a Joint CVE Training Resource online portal that provides federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, law enforcement, and correctional officers CVE-relevant training materials, analytic products, case studies, and other resources.

¹ [Book | Andrew Silke | Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences | n/a | 2003 | 120 || n/a |]

² [Book | John Horgan | Walking Away from Terrorism | n/a | 2009 | 151 || n/a |]

³ [Book | John Horgan | Walking Away from Terrorism | n/a | 2009 | 153 || n/a |]

⁴ [Briefing | International Center for the Study of Terrorism | The Disengagement Process | | 2012 | |||]

⁵ [Book | Andrew Silke | Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences | | 2003 | || n/a |]

⁶ [Book | John Horgan | Walking Away from Terrorism | n/a | 2009 | || n/a |]

⁷ [Book | Michael Jacobson | Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left | n/a | 2010 | || n/a |]

⁸ [The Disengagement Process | International Center for the Study of Terrorism | 2012 | |||]