Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches

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A number of Western countries are currently adding exit programs targeting militant Islamists to their counterterrorism efforts. Drawing on research into voluntary exit from violent extremism, this article identifies themes and issues that seem to cause doubt, leading to exit. It then provides a perspective on how these natural sources of doubt might best be brought to bear in connection with an exit program by drawing on social psychology and research into persuasion and attitude change. It is argued that an external intervention should stay close to the potential exiter’s own doubt, make the influence attempt as subtle as possible, use narratives and self-affirmatory strategies to reduce resistance to persuasion, and consider the possibility to promote attitudinal change via behavioral change as an alternative to seek to influence beliefs directly.

Two Alternative Approaches to Exit

The past decade saw a gradual broadening of the practice of counterterrorism. From an early emphasis on military means and classical police and intelligence measures to a broader conception where upstream preventive efforts have become integrated instruments for combating the long-term threat from militant Islamism. And as counterterrorism policies continue to evolve, more and more countries are considering or developing exit programs and interventions, aimed at peeling away active members from terrorist groups and reducing the level of recidivism among individuals convicted of terrorist offenses.1

A number of countries in South East Asia and the Middle East have been running such programs for years and currently much scholarly and political interest revolves around these efforts.2 Spurred by terrorist attacks on their homelands and a growing challenge of radicalization and recruitment in overcrowded prisons, authorities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt have added various disengagement and rehabilitation initiatives to their stock of counterterrorism instruments. While acknowledging the ambitious nature of exit interventions and the still relatively untested nature of the methods used, most analysts and commentators seem to agree that these programs are interesting and innovative takes on combating terrorism that should be mined for lessons applicable in a Western context.3

A handful of European countries also have experience with exit programs. Germany, Norway, and Sweden witnessed a peak in right-wing extremist activities in the early 1990s and established or enhanced existing programs aiming to facilitate the exit of activists...
from the scene. It is sometimes overlooked that these programs take a somewhat different approach to exit, as compared to the South East Asian and Middle Eastern programs, and thus might provide an alternative or complementary source of inspiration, especially considering that these programs have been established and operated within a European political, legal, and cultural context.

Although the South East Asian and Middle Eastern programs differ substantially in the level of formalization and the amount of resources available, and while some include social and psychological counseling, economic support and vocational training, the centerpiece tends to be a focus on ideological/theological re-education. An inculcation of a “correct” interpretation of Islam is regarded as the most effective and durable reformation a detainee might undergo. By means of discussion and dialogue with scholars, clerics, and ex-militants or other authority figures, the programs aim to convince the participants that militant Islam is theoretically and ideologically wrong and instead imprint messages like “Islam is against terrorism,” “acts of violence compromise the image of Islam,” “the Quran views the killing of civilians as unacceptable,” and “the authorities are not anti-Islamic.”

The European programs generally place less emphasis on ideology and instead focus on practical and economic assistance in connection with exit, on psychological counseling, as well as assistance with forming new social ties outside the extremist group. Some programs take an explicit hands-off approach to ideology. As put by one successful graduate from the Swedish exit program: “I thought Exit was a kind of re-education, but that was not the case. You were allowed to think what you liked.” Behavioral disengagement—staying clear of crime and remaining disengaged from the extremist scene—are typically the key indicators of success in the European programs.

There are commonalities between the South East Asian, Middle Eastern, and European programs, such as employing go-betweens, be they religious scholars, repentant terrorists, or family members, who are supposed to be better able to exert influence on the potential exiter than the authorities themselves. There is also a common emphasis on trust building between the agent of intervention and the target of intervention, a preference for a constructive and benevolent rather than accusatory approach, and an emphasis on demonstrating a fair and professional approach on the part of the authorities. But they represent alternative approaches in the sense that the influence attempts in South East Asia and the Middle East appear to revolve around theology and ideology and to be rather explicit and head on. In Germany, Norway, and Sweden, in contrast, exit interventions focus less and sometimes not at all on ideology and the influence attempt tend to be more indirect.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to draw strong conclusions about the effectiveness, not to speak of the comparative effectiveness of these different approaches. A few independent studies look at the effect of the Nordic programs and indicate a reasonable degree of success in terms of helping participants stay clear of extremist groups and activities. Independent data on the South East Asian and Middle Eastern programs, however, is hard to come by. And considering the security related and political sensitivities surrounding the efforts, independent data is likely to remain scarce.

So where should Western governments look for inspiration as they move to add exit interventions targeting militant Islamism to their counterterrorism repertoire?

This article starts by reviewing existing research into how and why individuals turn their back on violent extremism. It identifies three clusters of themes and issues that appear to cause doubt and prompt exit: Ideological doubt, doubt related to group and leadership issues, and doubt related to personal and practical issues. The article then turns to research into persuasion and attitude change from within the field of social psychology, to provide a perspective on how such doubts might best be leveraged as part of an exit intervention and to provide a perspective on issues and caveats to keep in mind, when looking for
Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism

Research into Disengagement

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

A literature review and a search of the leading terrorism research journals reveals a total of 16 articles and books published since the year 1990. Also included in this review is one DVD with a number of interviews with former members of the militant left-wing group “The Weatherman.” The studies are based on a total of 216 interviews, supplemented with a number of secondary sources. The interviews are distributed over different forms of extremism as shown in Table 1. Taken together the case studies span members of highly violent groups like Al Qaeda–inspired groups and the German Red Army Faction (RAF), as well as occasionally violent youth groups like a range of Nordic right-wing extremist groups.

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

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<th>Militant Islamism</th>
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indicate variation rather than any specific profile in terms of which individuals experience doubt and eventually decide to leave extremism behind.

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

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

Cluster One: Losing Faith in the Militant Ideology

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

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

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

One particularly potent trigger seems to be a confrontation with the real, bloody consequences of violence. A fascination with violence is characteristic for militant narratives and propaganda across different forms of extremism. “Their” violence and the resulting human suffering is displayed and emphasized in the communication, frequently with heartbreaking footage of dead, wounded, or suffering civilians. “Our” violence, on the other hand, is
glorified and celebrated as the only possible response to the injustices taking place. The consequences of the militants’ own violence are glossed over or the victims are presented as faceless and anonymous non-humans. In the real world, things are obviously different and confronted with the human costs of violence some begin to doubt.

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

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

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

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

Finally, the studies contain examples of how some exiters at some point and for different reasons become able to see the militant narrative from the outside. Increased contact with the outside world, travel, time to reflect and/or isolation from the militant group can make
some of the taken for granted truths of the militant narrative seem less plausible. Once an exiter is able to step outside the narrative and realize how self-referential and self-sustaining it is, he or she might feel disillusioned, even cheated. And since most parts of the militant narrative are closely interrelated, once an extremist begins to question one element, the whole worldview may eventually collapse. A number of militant Islamists and former left-wing extremists seem to have exited once they gained a perspective on the militant narrative and realized that the reality was a good deal more complex than what the militant narrative postulated.22

Cluster Two: Group and Leadership Failure

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

We know from research into radicalization, that a number of individuals are attracted to extremist groups because of the community and sense of belonging they offer. We also see in the militant propaganda how the “we” is contrasted to “them” and how it is idealized and glorified. “We” are depicted as a courageous, honourable, selfless, authentic, mutually supportive group—an avant garde with a deeper insight than the majority and a willingness to act instead of just talking. The leaders in such groups are naturally expected to embody these values and to be models and examples to be followed.23

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

Numerous exiters from right-wing extremist groups tell of their disappointment when realizing the extent of internal bickering, self-seeking behavior, mutual suspicion, competition, and backstabbing in the group. Some tell of gradually losing the sense of attachment and of the fatigue resulting from constantly having ones level of commitment questioned. Others are abruptly disabused of their illusions, when presumed brothers turn them in or let them down in a moment of need, for example in connection with a trial. Some even experience having their lives threatened by those they felt the closest to.24

Exiters from militant Islamism tell similar tales. One exiter relates how he was wounded during a stay in a training camp and then left to his own devices in terms of getting out and obtaining medical treatment. Another describes the feeling of let down when promises of help to leave a country at a time when authorities were believed to close in, did not materialize.25

On the extreme left, and at the intersection between doubts related to ideology and doubts related to group failure, some exiters point out how the use of violence externally at a certain point begins to infect and corrupt also relations internally between group members. It becomes tempting to seek to settle internal disagreements with the use of force as well, they indicate. Some also complain that criminal or reckless individuals are permitted to join their group or movement, undermining its coherence or its broader social support.26

Self-seeking, manipulative, cowardly, or outright incompetent leaders appear frequently in the narratives of ex-militants across different forms of extremism. On the right wing it appears that many are disappointed when realizing that the leaders are unable to live up to the ideals of physical strength, courage, and intelligence. Others note that in moments of danger or when apprehended by authorities, the leaders appear to gladly sell out to save their own skin.27
Former militant Islamists likewise tell of their disillusionment when they realized how they or others were regarded as dispensable cannon fodder by the leadership. Or how the leaders seemed to care more about power and money than about the cause.\(^{28}\)

Former Weathermen and RAF members point to how the leaders, despite an egalitarian and anti-materialist ideology, reserved certain privileges for themselves. Tales of brutal internal “criticism sessions” where dissent is squashed by the dominating faction also abound. Former Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) members moreover complain about opaque politicking within the group and—interlocking with doubt arising over a loss of faith in the militant ideology’s glorification of violence—about irresponsible and excessive targeting of civilians and of former members, ordered by the group leadership.\(^{29}\)

It appears that across the different forms of extremism, the strongly dualistic worldview with its sharp division of the world into us and them, right and wrong, black and white turns into a liability to the extremist group in the sense that it precludes a flexible handling of internal conflicts. Conflict resolution is reduced to two options: Either the dissenter is forced completely back into line or the dissenter is excluded. Since the ideology is presumed to represent the world as it really is—the truth—dissent is ascribed to character weakness, personal flaws, or deviousness. Such modes of conflict resolution can place a lid on dissent, but at a certain point it is likely to boil over and a number of individuals, as illustrated by the case studies, are bound to head for the door.

Cluster Three: Personal and Practical Circumstances

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

Growing older appears to be an important disengagement factor. The case studies contain examples of how front line activism begins to feel unnatural and awkward to a number of individuals as they enter their thirties and start thinking more seriously about getting a job, starting a career, having a family and a decent place to live.\(^{30}\) The extremist lifestyle of constant activism and confrontations with the presumed enemy also takes its toll. A number of individuals in the case studies describe a sense of confusion and fatigue preceding their exit. Just like doubts related to the legitimacy of using violence, the feeling of burnout appears to be a particularly powerful push toward exit if it coincides with a notion that the extremist group is not making any progress toward its social and political goals.\(^{31}\)

The studies also indicate how sanctions from the authorities might prompt disengagement. A number of extremists, particularly on the right wing, appear to experience a moment of reckoning in connection with receiving a prison term. They then disengage in an effort to come clear before something even worse happens. The wish to “get a hold on life” can become a particularly potent reason to leave when combined with a feeling of guilt toward close friends and family. A number of exiters describe how the quiet but plainly visible pain of family members made a deep impression on them.\(^{32}\) Some former extremists also indicate that they disengaged out of concern that police investigations or sanctions might
end up implicating friends and family directly.\textsuperscript{33} A related impetus for exit appears to be the notion of responsibility toward a child or a new girlfriend, which the exiter feels should be protected from the potentially traumatic experiences that goes with having a parent or partner engaged with extremism.\textsuperscript{34}

Quitting, in many of these instances, becomes more a pragmatic choice than something prompted by an ideological change of heart. A number of exiters explicitly state that though they behave differently they think the same. Others claim that even if their exit had nothing to do with ideological doubt, their attitudes gradually changed as they stopped spending time with their extremist peers.\textsuperscript{35}

Leveraging Themes in Voluntary Exits Within Exit Programs: How?

The case studies reviewed above do not establish a foundation for conclusions about causality or for building theories about exit. Though the total number of interviews is significant, the interviewees are not randomly selected, none of the studies operate with a control group, and the collection and processing of data varies from case study to case study.

However, the case studies, when taken together, permit us to identify three distinct clusters of factors that seem to cause doubt. And these factors appear to be at work across different forms of extremism, across time, and across different Western countries. They arguably provide the best research based pointers as to what themes external actors could attempt to leverage in an exit intervention: A humanization of the enemy, de-idealizing violence, leveraging internal strain in the extremist groups, leveraging bad leadership and/or personal and practical issues such as guilt feelings, longing for a normal life, and burnout.

Moreover, the case studies indicate that increased contact with the world outside the extremist environment is a frequent trigger or accelerator of an exit process—a fact that supports the notion that external actors and external interventions can make a difference. Social influence—direct or indirect—appears to be at work.

However, the case studies, looking at voluntary rather than engineered exits, do not tell us how outsiders might best approach a potential exiter, probe for doubts and seek to leverage them. As we have seen, existing programs in South East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe differ in terms of how overtly they seek to influence the attitudes of the potential exiter and in terms of how much emphasis they place on ideology. As we lack the necessary data to gauge the relative success of the existing programs, the following sections provide a perspective on how to approach a potential exiter by drawing on key concepts and experimental research within a subbranch of social psychology, which has grappled extensively with the potentials and limitations of persuasion and attitude change via social influence: Social psychology theory and experimental research influenced by cognitive psychology.\textsuperscript{36}

Social psychology is concerned with how external, situational, social, and interpersonal factors impact on attitudes, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. While bordering on disciplines like psychology and sociology, social psychology is characterized by its explicit focus on social stimuli and by having the individual rather than the group as its unit of analysis.\textsuperscript{37} Social psychology covers an enormous range of topics from a multitude of different theoretical perspectives. Cognitive psychology has inspired the development of influential concepts, such as cognitive dissonance and reactance, elaborated below, as well as numerous experimental studies looking at the possibilities and limitations of persuasion and resistance. Research within the cognitive strand stand out by (also) focusing on...
persuasion and attitude change on issues of high personal relevance to the influence target, and thus appears particularly suited to provide perspectives on issues and caveats to keep in mind when seeking to prompt exit from violent extremism.

Resistance to Persuasion and Cognitive Dissonance

It is well established by experimental studies that individuals are more resistant to persuasion on issues they consider personally important than on issues to which they attach less importance. Individuals have been shown to generate comparatively more negative thoughts and feelings in response to counterattitudinal messages on high- as opposed to low-importance attitudes. A variety of resistance mechanisms have been identified: Some resist by derogating or discrediting the source of the attitude-discrepant message, some selectively pay attention to attitude-congruent parts of the message but not to attitude-incongruent parts, some actively scrutinizes the message for faults and counterargue, others react mainly by bolstering their existing attitudes with additional arguments. People have also been shown to rewrite the past to make it fit with present views and concoct additional evidence to support their stance even if the original information that led to that stance has been invalidated.

A central theoretical concept, proposing to explain this type of resistance, is Leon Festinger’s concept of cognitive dissonance. According to this perspective, resistance stems from a fundamental aversion against introducing dissonant themes into ones attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. People strive to see themselves, and to appear to others, as consistent and competent and harbor a dislike against going through a potentially painful and disorienting process of restructuring ideas and values that are closely tied up with their identity, life, and life choices.

It seems reasonable to assume that many of the extremists approached as part of an exit program, having committed crimes, served time in prison, broken with friends or relatives, and/or submitted to various forms of hardship in the name of their extremist commitment, will be highly resistant to embark on the supposedly rather fundamental cognitive revisions required, if they were to admit to themselves that they had been misguided. As a point of departure, we should expect that external attempts at influencing attitudes in order to promote exit will face substantial challenges.

Boomerang Effect and Reactance

But exerting external influence on a potential exiter is arguably not only difficult. It is also potentially risky. Empirical studies have demonstrated a tendency for failed persuasion attempts to create a boomerang effect leading to a strengthening rather than weakening of the challenged attitude. Obviously, this is a highly undesirable prospect in connection with an exit intervention.

One particularly influential theoretical explanation of the boomerang effect comes from Jack W. Brehm’s reactance theory. Brehm’s key notion is that people try to protect their freedom to think, act, and believe as they like. If they suspect that they are being targeted by a deliberate influence attempt—no matter how well-meaning or well-reasoned the message might be—they react by going against the perceived influence as a way of reasserting their freedom. In the process of resisting, by means of for example looking for flaws in the message and counterargue, bolstering existing attitudes, concocting additional evidence to support them, and so on, the original attitudes become stronger.
Later empirical research has qualified the predictions of reactance theory by pointing out that the effect of resisting influence on attitude strength depends on the meta-cognitions of the influence target. If the target perceives that he or she successfully resisted a strong assault on his or her attitudes, attitude certainty will go up. If, however, the influence target perceives that he or she struggled to defend his or her attitudes, attitude certainty might actually decrease despite the fact that the initial persuasion attempt was fought off.\footnote{44}

In general terms, the implication of cognitive dissonance and reactance theory would be to make sure that the influence attempt in exit programs is as subtle as possible in order not to activate the cognitive defenses of the potential exiter. However, the research also indicates that a strong, overt influence attempt might be an effective push over strategy in some cases—when it is likely that the target of influence will fail to, or perceive that he or she struggled to, defend his or her views. In practical terms, if the agent of intervention knows the potential exiter well, has a base of trust to operate from, and is able to identify issues on which the exiter is already consciously or unconsciously doubting, an attack strategy might work. Arguably, however, it is of central importance that one attacks \textit{only} where the potential exiter is already in doubt, while avoiding issues where there is no current doubt. If, for example, an exiter has begun to doubt some aspects of the militant ideology, but is still emotionally committed to the extremist group, an exit intervention should obviously focus on the ideology, but avoid themes related to the group. If, on the other hand, and as exemplified in some of the case studies above, an individual remains convinced of the truth of the ideology, but wishes to exit because of the practical and personal costs of the extremist lifestyle, a confrontation with counterideology—that is, counterattitudinal messages—would likely cause this potential exiter to generate negative cognitive and emotional reactions. And possible pull back and retrench.

Thus, research within social psychology underlines the complexity of attempts at promoting exit from extremism and the absence of one-size-fits-all approaches. Mandatory ideological re-education, as it is apparently practiced in some South East Asian and Middle Eastern programs, does not seem advisable. Even if the militant worldview is illogical and distasteful when seen from the outside, an attempt to convince the potential exiter of this by the use of logical and/or theological arguments is risky. Instead, one should attempt to identify, stay close to, and leverage off from issues where the potential exiter is already in doubt. Ideally, the influence should be so subtle that the potential exiter does not perceive it as an influence attempt, but instead as a prod to draw his or her own conclusions.

**Circumnavigating Resistance**

What if there are no identifiable weak points or doubts or what if we simply lack the necessary knowledge of a specific potential exiter to find them? It follows from dissonance and reactance theory that unless an external influence agent hits on a spot, where the potential exiter is doubting or wavering, chances are that even the most well-argued, logical, and cogent message, will be counterargued and rejected. If this happens, simply adding logical and/or theological strength to the arguments against for example militant Islamism’s interpretation of Islam or extreme right-wing notions about racial differences does not appear to be a formula for success. Instead of seeking to overpower the cognitive defenses of a potential exiter, one might instead seek to circumnavigate them. Research into persuasion has since long pointed to for example timing and match between agent and target of intervention as important factors and newer research has begun to explore additional
means of reducing resistance. Robert Cialdini and other researchers have pointed out that affinity between the agent and the target of intervention, for example common friends, background, or interests, generally promote liking, and liking enhances the ability of the agent of intervention to get through to the target. If the agent of intervention enjoys authority within a relevant field of knowledge, high social standing within a relevant social group, or is seen to represent a number of values shared by the target of intervention, influence chances are enhanced. It has also been demonstrated that influence attempts stand a better chance if the target is fatigued, experiencing a personal crisis, dislocated due to a geographical move or a major change in life circumstances. Thus, the timing of an influence attempt to coincide with a point in time where the target’s cognitive defenses are presumable weakened, is important.

In this light, practices such as enrolling potential exiters while they are in prison and using presumably credible go-betweens such as scholars, former extremists, or family members, employed by a number of existing exit programs, seem well placed. More recent research has pointed to additional ways of reducing or circumnavigating resistance. As we have seen above, dissonance theory predicts that when people resist a counterattitudinal message, one reason is a dislike against appearing inconsistent and against potentially having to go through a revision of thoughts and feelings that are closely tied in with one’s life, life choices, and identity. In other words, people resist when their self-concept is threatened. Logically, one might expect less resistance if the potentially negative impact on the self-concept could be balanced. Indeed, research has indicated, that people resist less and are more open minded if their self-concept has been affirmed, for example by recognizing an admirable personal trait in the target person, prior to presenting him or her with a counterattitudinal message. However, for resistance to be reduced the affirmation has to be on a trait or personal quality that is important to the influence target, not directly related to the message the agent of influence wishes to get across (then reactance might set in), and yet it must be compatible with the wished for behavior.

In addition, research has indicated the potential of the use of narratives, as opposed to logical arguments and rhetoric, in influence situations where resistance is to be expected. A narrative, particularly if it is exciting and recounts the story of a real-life character, is less likely to be seen as an overt influence attempt, less likely to present explicit opinions that can be counterargued, and more difficult to discount as untrue. It has been demonstrated that while listening to an absorbing narrative, people are less likely to generate negative cognitions and affects, even if the implicit messages of the narrative are counterattitudinal. There has been extensive discussion of the use of counternarratives as a part of the effort against violent extremism at the societal level. The discussion has rarely extended to look at limits and possibilities of the use of narratives in individual exit interventions. The research into narrative persuasion indicates a potential for circumnavigating some of the resistance that would be generated by an anti-extremism message presented in the form of logical arguments, and deserves further exploration.

The Path of Least Resistance

A central perspective in social psychology research is, as mentioned, the notion that people display cognitive conservatism and strive for consistency in what they say, feel, and do. As a point of departure, the urge for consistency represents a barrier to persuasion and attitude change. However, the striving for consistency also implies that if an agent of intervention is actually successful in promoting a change in the way an extremist feels or behaves,
attitudes might eventually follow suit as the influence target seeks to reduce the introduced dissonance. Thus, cognitive consistency and dissonance theory indicate, as does the case studies into voluntary exit, that there are a number of potential paths toward exit from extremism. Instead of being limited to work directly on extremist attitudes an indirect approach via behavior or emotions is arguably possible.

An example of a practical application of this insight can be found in cognitive therapy—a treatment with a proven record of reducing recidivism among criminal offenders in a Western context. Cognitive therapy is based on the premise that criminal offenders tend to exhibit certain common traits of thinking—self-justification, displacement of blame, lack of empathy with the victims—whereby they justify their otherwise unjustifiable behavior to themselves. The therapy does not aim to persuade the offender to adopt a different point of view, at least not directly. Instead, it employs training in, for example, conflict resolution and anger management in order to promote a different set of behaviors, which in turn provide pathways to influencing the attitudes and beliefs of the offender.

Cognitive therapy has not been tested on terrorist convicts and the approach is not necessarily directly transferable. But the general point—that there are more potential paths to cause a change in beliefs—is relevant. Even if ideological revision and repentance might do more to satisfy general notions of justice, cognitive dissonance, and the practical experience with cognitive therapy indicates that it is not the only path and also not necessarily the more solid path to exit. Even if the original reason for an exit did not implicate ideology, extremist attitudes might well moderate with time as a consequence of behavioral change—no longer acting out the extremist ideology.

In line with the recommendation springing from reactance theory, it appears advisable to abstain from a direct attempt to influence the beliefs of a potential exiter, unless it is established by an initial screening, that he or she is already experiencing doubt with regard to for example the glorification of violence, the demonization of the presumed enemy, or the absolutist claims of the extremist narrative. Working instead on changing behavior via social, practical, and economic support might well represent a path of less resistance toward the same goal: A weakening of the extremist beliefs.

To sum up, we have seen that the exit programs in South East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe all place emphasis on trust building, on a constructive and benevolent rather than accusatory approach, and on demonstrating a fair and professional approach on part of the authorities. In light of what social psychology tells us about cognitive consistency, dissonance, and reactance such an approach seems well-placed. But the programs in South East Asia and the Middle East on the one hand and Europe on the other also differ with regard to how openly they seek to influence the potential exiter and in terms of how much emphasis they place on ideology. It is currently not possible to draw firm conclusions about the relative merits of these approaches due to the lack of independent evaluations or data on success rates. Central theoretical concepts and experimental studies from social psychology, however, provide pointers. Arguably, an external intervention should stay close to the potential exiter’s own doubt, make the influence attempt as subtle as possible, use narratives and self-affirmatory strategies to reduce resistance to persuasion, and consider the possibility to promote attitudinal change via behavioral change as an alternative to seek to influence beliefs directly. A fixed curriculum, mandatory ideological re-education, and a strong reliance on the power of rhetoric and arguments—no matter how well-founded in reason and theology—on the other hand, is unlikely to provide a successful formula in a Western context.
Conclusion

More than a decade into the effort to combat international militant Islamism the counterterrorism practices of Western governments have evolved. A narrow focus on classical military, police, and intelligence measures has been succeeded by a broader conception of what it takes to keep a democratic society safe. Today a number of countries include preventive measures and community engagement as part of their overall counterterrorism policies. And many are in the process of adding disengagement and rehabilitation measures targeting members of extremist groups or individuals convicted of terrorist offenses.

Skeptical voices have, rightly, cautioned that attempts at re-engineering complex sociopsychological phenomena—worldviews, beliefs, and behaviors—presume a lot. Although a number of countries have been running exit programs for several years, independent documentation of whether and how they work is scarce. There is no proven template for success that Western governments could seek to emulate.

However, the fact, that individuals outside of the extremist environment can play a crucial role in triggering or facilitating exit is well documented by the case studies into voluntary exit. The case studies underline that there are a plenty of internal contradictions, dilemmas, and tensions within extremist groups and narratives. A presumed enemy that acts kindly, a confrontation with the real and bloody consequences of extremist violence, dysfunctional groups, leadership failure, and personal and practical costs connected with the extremist lifestyle might all provide the necessary opening. And considering the potential human, social, and economic gains connected to limiting extremism upstream rather than downstream, attempts to add exit interventions to the counterterrorism toolbox of Western countries seem well worth the effort.

Notes


8. For a discussion of how one might measure effectiveness if the necessary data were to be made available, see John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs,” Terrorism and Political Violence 22 (2010), pp. 267–291.


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


23. Inspire Magazine; Pierce, *The Turner Diaries*; Varon, *Bringing the War Home*.


27. Ibid., p. 133; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism,” p. 792; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*,” p. 158.


32. Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism,” p. 797; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*,” p. 179.


34. Aho, *This Thing of Darkness*, p. 135; Demant et al., *Decline and Disengagement*, p. 139; Olsen, “Nynazistiske miljøer,” p. 48; Reinares, “Exit From Terrorism,” p. 703; Rommelspacher, “*Der Hass*,” p. 194.


46. Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn, eds., *Resistance and Persuasion* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004). One caveat is, that most research looks at issues where the degree of personal involvement is likely to be significant—for example, questions of affirmative action or questions of whether potentially dangerous psychiatric patients should be allowed into communities—but still lower than the level of personal involvement an individual would have on the stay/exit from extremism question.
53. If someone with a deceptive intention changes his or her behavior, this obviously does not have any immediate or direct impact on attitudes. Exit initiatives cannot stand alone in counterterrorism, but should be supplemented with classical means so as to guard against the risks that might arise from a deceptive exploitation of exit programs by insincere participants.