Leaving Terrorism Behind, Individual and collective disengagement. Edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan.

Introduction: Conceptual un-clarity and clarity

Disengagement from terrorist and other violent movements is in fact a normal and almost constant process. Always some of the individuals engaged in violent activism are in the process of disengaging from their groups or considering leaving.

There are some individuals who distance themselves from the extremist group and its violent means, but retain their extremist views on society. There is no clear evidence to suggest that disengagement may necessarily bring with it deradicalization nor is there clear evidence to support the argument that deradicalization is a necessary accompaniment to disengagement.

There is need of distinction between:
1) Cognitive aspects of deradicalisation
2) Behavioral aspects

Initially, there should be at least as much emphasis on changing behavior and the relationship with the militant group as on changing the ideological values of the extremist.

A one-side focus on changing ideology alone (e.g. through theological debate) is unlikely to work unless it is also combined with influencing their behavior and addressing their social ties to the group, family members, friends and others.

Successful programs must combine addressing different dimensions of attitudes, behavior and social ties in very creative ways. Extremist groups fulfill functional needs in terms of providing identity, community, protection and excitement. These elements need to be addressed in disengagement programs.

Most ongoing programs have individual (ex)-extremists as their primary target groups and attempt to facilitate the reintegration of individual back into society. Former terrorist may also play important roles in reducing new recruitment into terrorism.

Important consideration: To whom do disengagement initiatives apply? Are they aimed at fringe members only or hardcore members? Experience from Norway shows that intervening early with youths who are flirting with the racist scene, and offering alternative means solve their needs, it is possible to prevent them from becoming fully part of the group and adopting its racist values and violent mode of behavior. Thereby recruitment can be reduced.

And how do we know that someone has actually disengaged, e.g. what kind of assessment can be done to ascertain the risk of someone re-engaging? How can we manage the risk of individuals re-entering violent groups.

Some may disengage from involvement in a specific role or function, but remain involved in the broader movement by engaging in some activity that is beneficial in some way for the movement. Disengagement does not necessarily imply that individual leaves terrorism or extremist environment behind – they may simply move from one role into another.
Attempts to promote disengagement will need to be carefully designed within the context of the specific sociopolitical or other issues experienced by the group.

*Lessons from disengagement programs in Norway, Sweden and Germany:*

**Exit program Norway:**
- Parental network groups proved to be a highly effective method for concerned parents in order to get their teenagers out of extremist groups. These parents had a strong need for knowledge and information on what is going on in these groups. Parents could also reach agreements on common position regarding what their children were allowed to take part in, or what should not be accepted in terms of dress code (nazi-style). The network group could thereby strengthen the parents’ monitoring, control and ability to provide care for their children.
- In 2003, the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) in collaboration with the ordinary police stated a project on “preventive conversations” with young people who had become involved with violent right-wing organizations. With younger members, their parents were also approached together with their children. The purpose was to inform the youths and parents of the possible negative consequences of their involvement and motivate them to break with the extremist group.
- The strongest aspects of the Norwegian approach were probably that Exit activities became integrated into the normal activities of established public agencies, such as municipalities.

**Exit in Sweden:**
- To a greater extent than the Norwegian model, the Swedish exit organization worked directly with the individuals who contacted Exit on their own initiative. This was contingent on the fact that the first head of Exit in Sweden and most staff members were themselves former participants in the Neo-Nazi or White Power movement. This gave them significant credibility and insights, making it easier to establish contact with individuals
- Most take contact on own initiative; others are passed on through intermediaries like youth workers, police officers, teachers or parents. The individual is then given a contact person, usually someone with personal experiences as former participant in the white power scene.
- Exit Sweden also offers various types of outreach activities, such as lecturing at schools. Such events are often opportunities for establishing contact with youths.
- Exit Sweden has developed a five-stage programs that describes the process a person will typically go through when leaving the movement and re-establishing into mainstream society, 1) motivation phase, 2) disengagement phase, 3) Establishment phase, 4) Reflection phase, 5) Stabilization phase

**EXIT- Deutschland BfV (Aussteigerprogram für Rechtsextremisten vom Bundesamt für Vergassungsschutz )**
- Does not establish contact with potential dropouts. It mainly tries to become known by appearing in the media. The “dropout” himself must then take the initiative and make contact with the project.
The first step in the exit process consists of sketching a general profile of the person. To know his world-views, motivation and goal, focusing in on the person’s various problems. The conditions for successfully disengaging are: conquering addiction, attaining socio-economic security through education or work and acquiring social connection outside the extreme-right group. Often the BfV provides practical support such as help in moving house or looking for a job. Organizing alleviating burden of debt, stabilizing relationship with parents, creating a vision of the future, learning standard rules of behavior.

The BfV makes a contract and the disengagement process is successful if the person achieves the goals laid down in the contract and is stable for the next two years. It normally takes around two years to achieve the goals this means it takes a total of about four years before the person has completed the entire process. Compared with other programs, the BfV offers a rather long period of guidance.

If the person is in a permanent relationship, the partner is also brought into the program and receives the same support.

The duration of such an exit process varies considerably. Usually the dropouts receive guidance for between six months and three years.

It works in three fields: 1) assistance to individuals wanting to disengage, 2) family help and 3) community coaching and 4) ex-Nazis campaigning against Nazism.

The North Rhine-Westphalian disengagement program:

- It also works with contracts. The process begins with cleaning the house. The guide confiscates all right-wing extremist attributes. In most serious cases this can result in the person being left with very little clothing, losing his entire music collection and staring at blank walls.
- The program demands that the dropout actually leaves the scene, stops committing criminal offences, adopts another world-view and distances himself wholeheartedly from all extremist values.
- A conscious effort is made to “build up a positive identity by experiencing success and creating alternative new values”.
- Many need help in moving house, finding a suitable place to work or to be trained.
- The dropouts are guided for an average of three years.

The Hessian disengagement program:

- The Hesse program has two main branches. The first is aimed at hanger-on and young people who only recently ended up in an extreme-right environment. These are mostly between 13 and 16 years. Program staff conducts interviews with them in which they are told about risks of involvement.
- The second branch is aimed at young people and young adults who have spent a longer amount of time in an extreme-right group
- Often in the families of the young people, anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes are said to be more rule than exception.
- In Hesse too, the beginning phase involves cleaning out the person’s residences and drawing up a contract.
The program warns against too high expectation: While most dropouts no longer commit new offences and break off contact with extreme-right circles, their ideological views – and enemy images – often remain unchanged.

Conclusion about exit-projects in Norway, Sweden and Germany:

Common traits:
- They are all promoting and facilitating disengagement of individuals involved in racist and right-wing extremist movements, and not only focusing on reducing recruitment to such groups, which has been the traditional preventive approach.
- The projects are addressing the general life situation of the clients rather than giving priority to changing racist and extremist attitudes.
- Involvement of family members

Differences:
- The German governmental programs tend to put stricter conditions on including new clients in the program. Continued contact with friends from the extremist scene may be sufficient reasons to be excluded.
- Governmental programs may face certain legal problems (particular in Germany) which, for example, restrict the security service from including youths under the age of 18 in their disengagement program.
- The NGO Exit programs also have some advantages. They are more based on principles of peer counseling schemes and mentoring by a more experience peer.
- The threshold for a neo-Nazi seeking help from an NGO run by people who have a personal experience from the same extremist scene is probably lower than for approaching a disengagement program run by a security service or another governmental organization.
- Trust: It is easier for individuals trying to disengage from neo-Nazi scene to trust a guide who in the past has been through what they are going through than trusting someone from the intelligenes agency – the enemy of the past
- One advantage of the Norwegian models is that disengagement work becomes part of the normal activities of established public agencies and their customary partnerships with other agencies and NGO’s. This model also provides for flexibility in terms of capacity and might be a good solution for small countries with limited problems of extremist.
- Specialized organizations for facilitating disengagement may be more demanding in terms of resources but are also likely to have a sharper focus on the specific problem they are set up to deal with.