Voluntary Disengagement from terrorism

Why Doing Nothing is a Good Policy Option for Handling (Some) Returning Foreign Fighters

Dr. Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, Guest Scholar, CISAC 20/10-2014
Outline

• Why study disengagement? And how?
• Data: Aggregation of primary source based case studies
• Why people leave violent extremism:
  • Cracks in the ideology/group dysfunction/changing personal priorities
• Do sanctions help or hurt?
• Disengagement and returning foreign fighters
Why study disengagement?

• Who leaves? High/low; veteran/newcomer; killer/non-criminal...
• No common profile.
• No theory. Very little existing knowledge → exploratory approach.
• Data to probe ”beneath the surface,” interviews.
  • Scientific studies.
  • Western context.
  • Case studies on militant Islamism, left wing extremism, right wing extremism, separatist terrorism.
Data: Aggregation of primary source based case studies

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Militant Islamism</th>
<th>Extreme Right</th>
<th>Extreme Left</th>
<th>Seperatist</th>
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<td>19</td>
<td>107</td>
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Number of interviews/individual disengagers in case studies.
Why people leave violent extremism:

1. Ideological doubt.
   - Presumed enemy, which does not act like one.
   - Exposure to real consequences of extremist violence.
   - Increased exposure to world outside.

2. Disillusionment with extremist peers or leaders.

3. Changing personal priorities.
   - Growing older.
   - Guilt feelings.
   - Burn out.
Do sanctions help or hurt?

• Legal sanctions/prison term.
• Threat of or application of other sanctions (surveillance, disruption, travel ban, withdrawal of welfare, expulsion from educational institutions).
• Social sanctions (named/shamed, confronted on ideas, parental intervention).

• It depends......
Disengagement and returning foreign fighters?

• Thomas Hegghammer: 1/9 became involved with terrorism against the West.
• By implication: 8/9 did not.
• No data on individual level characteristics or circumstances.
Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Are conclusions applicable?

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Number of interviews/individual disengagers in case studies.
Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Are conclusions applicable?

• Across from different kinds of extremism?
  • Comparative studies generally find same patterns in terms of why people doubt and disengage across from different kinds of extremism.

• Across from cases with and without foreign fighting or training camp experience?
  • Foreign fighters more deeply radicalized/less likely to experience ideological doubt?
  • Foreign fighters more effectively integrated with their peers/less likely to become disillusioned with group?
  • Foreign fighters less likely to change personal priorities/long for normal life, guilt feelings, suffer burn out?

Tentative conclusion: No basic differences in push and pull factors.
Disengagement and returning foreign fighters: Policy implications?

• High number of returning fighters.
• Don’t get in the way of natural disengagement processes!
• Sanctions will help or hurt, depending on individual circumstances.
• General, punitive measures are likely to push some individuals back into the arms of extremist groups that they would otherwise have left behind.
• Doing nothing not viable. Individualize interventions. Match complexity with complexity.
• Mobilize knowledge, resources, competencies in governance networks of central + local government + concerned civil society.
Thank you
Defining disengagement

• "The action or process of withdrawing from involvement in an activity, situation, or group." Oxford Dictionary
• "Process of becoming less radical in behaviour and beliefs." Demant, Slootman, Buijs and Tillie.

• **Behavioral** indicators:
  - No longer engaging in violence.
  - No longer engaging in other forms of support for extr. groups.
  - No longer socializing with violent extremists.
  - Actively engaging in countering violent extremism.