



## **STEPPING OUT: SUPPORTING EXIT STRATEGIES FROM VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM**

**PROJECT: EUROPEAN NETWORK OF FORMER EXTREMISTS, FEASIBILITY  
ASSESSMENT**

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**Author**

Tufyal Choudhury – ISD Advisor, member of European Union Network of Experts on Violent Radicalisation (ENAR) and Lecturer at Durham University.

**Researchers**

Ghaffar Hussain – Head of Outreach and Training Unit, Quillium Foundation

Talal Rajab – Trainer, Quillium Foundation

**Editor**

Sofia Hamaz – Programme Associate, Institute for Strategic Dialogue

# 1. Introduction

The experience and knowledge that former extremists have can be valuable in countering radicalisation and de-legitimising violent extremism. They can support those who are at risk of recruitment, counter extremist ideology and challenge those who are still involved to leave. While there is considerable attention paid to preventing individuals becoming radicalised or joining extremist groups and towards challenging the views and ideologies of these individuals, groups and movements, less is understood or known about the experiences of those who might want to leave extremist organisations or movements; the barriers individuals face and the support that could help them step out and stay out of violent extremism.

This report aims to contribute to countering radicalisation and de-legitimising violent extremism through research into the potential for the development of a network of former extremists. Through interviews with former members of extremist organisations, the research aimed to assess:

- Trends in defection from specific organisations and individuals that might be willing to share their experience via a network to counter radicalisation processes;
- Their motivations for (and barriers to) leaving organisations or movements;
- Their ideas about the structure, scope and purpose of a network; and
- The number of defecting radicals in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom who would be willing to establish or join a network to actively counter violent extremism and explore the type of activity that they might most effectively engage in to this end.

The report is based on interviews with former members of extremist organisations, key community workers, policy makers and a review of recent research on deradicalisation and exit strategies from extremist organisations.

- A total of ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with former extremists: six in England and four in Denmark. Three of the interviewees were female, seven male. They were involved in a variety of different organisations or movements. Five of the interviewees were involved with Hizb-ut-Tahrir, two described themselves as former jihadists, the other three were involved with Al-Muhajiroun, Hezbollah and the PKK. Individuals were asked about their motivations and reasons for joining as well as their experiences of leaving the extremist organisation or movement. Questions explored the factors that led individuals to leave; the barriers they faced in trying to leave; the challenges they faced in reintegrating back into mainstream society; and their ideas about the possibility, structure, scope and purpose of a network of former extremists.

- In addition to the interviews, the key findings and issues emerging from the research were also discussed with practitioners, policy makers and community stakeholders. In Denmark this included interviews with national and municipal level policy officials, as well as key Muslim community stakeholders. In the UK discussions involved local level policy practitioners and community stakeholders.
- A workshop was also held in September 2009 with some of the former extremists interviewed and practitioners from Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, to gain critical and constructive feedback on the study's initial findings and to develop further ideas around the type of initiative that can be developed to involve former extremists in counter radicalisation (see workshop agenda attached in Appendix 1).

Wider efforts were also made to contact a larger number of former extremists, policy officials and community workers for this research, who given the sensitive nature of the project were unwilling to engage further or be formally interviewed. The process of conducting the fieldwork for this study confirms the importance of high levels of trust, developed through personal contacts and relationships, in gaining access to former members of extremist organisations and movements. For the interviewers, existing networks and contacts with former members of extremist organisations and movements or community activists with close links to such individuals played an important role in securing interviews in Denmark and the UK. The limited number of existing contacts and access to networks of former extremists in Germany and also the Netherlands, lead to reliance on public officials in facilitating access. Access brokered in this way did not create the trust needed to secure interviews.

The report begins by looking at the key findings from the interviews and discussions with former extremists. It examines reasons for joining, triggers to leaving and the barriers individuals faced in trying to leave. It then considers the role and contribution that former extremists are willing to play in a network that could address some of the issues identified in terms of support for those considering leaving.

### *1.1 Extremist organisations and movements*

Terrorism studies, as a field of research, remains in its early stages. Within both academic and policy discourse the concepts of radicalisation and deradicalisation remain deeply contested. For policymakers there remain challenges in identifying the group that should be the focus of policy interventions and agreeing the terms to be used to describe such groups. Radicalisation can be defined as 'the processes by which trust in the system declines and people withdraw further and further into their own group because they no longer feel part of society'.<sup>1</sup> The European

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<sup>1</sup> Sprinzak, E., (1991) "The process of delegitimation: towards a linkage theory of political terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 3, No 1, pp. 50-68.

Commission (2006) suggests that the focus of policy should be on 'violent radicalisation'. This is defined as a process that "involves embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism".<sup>2</sup> Thus, it covers both attitudes and behaviours relating to political violence. Others have argued for an even broader approach with a focus on those who are sympathetic to or fail to condemn terrorism, the so called 'fence sitters'<sup>3</sup>. The relationship between individuals deemed to have radical views, norms or values and actual participation in violence remains an area that needs to be explored further.

In this report the term extremist organisation or movement is preferred. The term extremist organisation is in this context used to cover groups that encourage, support or condone acts of terrorism. The study follows the Council of the European Union definition of terrorism as international acts that were committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation. The reference to both organisations and movements is recognition that some individuals do not join any formal organisation or group but view themselves as part of a movement.

### *1.2 Key outcomes and findings:*

- 8 Former members of violent movements, as well as 4 community workers and 4 experts on deradicalisation, have been identified as willing to continue as a pan-European working group on the here proposed initiatives;
- There is a need for support services directed at those that are questioning their involvement in extremist groups, organisations or movements and thinking about leaving such groups or movements. Support for individuals thinking about leaving can be directed at two distinct areas: intellectual and emotional;
- An internet based platform offering online advice, information and support combined with a range of offline services including a telephone helpline, a befriending service, support groups, 'safe spaces' and targeted debates was identified as likely to be the most effective tool for outreach;

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, (2006) "*Terrorist recruitment: a Commission's Communication addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation*," MEMO/05/329.

<sup>3</sup> Saggat, S., (2006) "The One Percent World: Managing the Myth of Muslim Religious Extremism," *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No 3, pp. 314-327.

- There is a need for further scoping work to develop a full project proposal which outlines the details of support services to be developed in this area, confirms costing and identifies potential partners.
- There is limited data on the rate and trends in defection from extremist organisations. The lack of accurate data presents a significant gap in our knowledge and understanding of the impact of counter terrorism policy. The development of a network of former extremists can make an important contribution in addressing this knowledge gap.

## 2. Key Findings from Interviews

This section draws on the interviews carried out for this research with former members of extremist organisations and movements and placing these findings within the context of the existing research literature. It begins by looking briefly at reasons individuals gave for joining and staying in extremist organisations or movements. It then focuses on the situations that trigger individuals to question their involvement and lead to their decision to leave as well as the barriers or difficulties that individuals face in actually leaving.

### 2.1 *Joining*

Interviewees were asked about their reasons for joining extremist organisations or movements. A strong recurring theme was the *emotional vulnerability* of those that are drawn into these groups and the emotional hold the groups exercise over individuals. One interviewee talked about being ‘broken down’ or ‘controlled’, of having ‘low confidence’ and ‘low self esteem’. Others referred to experiences of being involved in youth crime and violence and of losing control of their lives after personal traumas such as the death of a parent.

For some interviewees, these experiences shaped their need to *respond to injustice* as part of an organisation or movement. Some interviewees link their personal experiences into their compassion towards others: “the grievances I felt for my brothers and sisters in Palestine, I felt that I knew what it was like to be abused, what it was like to have your rights taken away. And I connected with that. And I thought we could change the world”. Group involvement in turn provides a *sense of purpose and direction*, accompanied by responsibility: “It was all about being part of a family, because I did not have one. I felt that I was the chosen one; that Allah (swt)<sup>4</sup> has made me different and I was here for a call”.

It is also clear from interviews and discussions with former extremists that for some, joining organisations and movements was part of an ideological journey and the appeal in joining lay in the focus of such organisations or movements on *addressing political issues*, in particular conflicts involving Muslims. The organisations and movements provided a framework for interpreting and understanding political conflicts as well as offering solutions to those conflicts.

The findings from the interviews are consistent with the three main motivations for joining extremist groups, identified in recent research literature. These are: the response to perceived

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<sup>4</sup> The acronym of Subhanaho wa ta'alam, meaning glorified and exalted is He. A common Islamic phrase used following the utterance or writing of ‘Allah’.

injustice (instrumental motive), the need for social bonding (motives of identity) and the need for meaning (ideological motive).<sup>5</sup> Mirroring these motives to some extent, are the different needs that radicalization fulfils for the individuals. These are political activist (response to injustice), socio-cultural (belonging to a group/movement) and religious (unambiguous meaning/purpose).<sup>6</sup> Selective incentive' (personal advantages from membership) is a fourth dimension.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Deradicalisation

Compared to the growing literature examining pathways into extremist organisations, there is a paucity of research on the processes leading people to step away from violence and radical views.<sup>8</sup> While insights into radicalisation inform understandings of deradicalisations, it is important not to see deradicalisation as the reverse of radicalisation as deradicalisation has its own processes and influencing factors.<sup>9</sup> The interviews carried out for this research therefore provide some further evidence in an area and a process which remains under researched and is amongst the 'most untheorised in terrorism literature'.<sup>10</sup>

In exploring the views emerging from the interviews about stepping out of extremist organisations or movements a distinction should be made between *deradicalisation* and *disengagement*.<sup>11</sup> In this context deradicalisation involves a cognitive shift away from the views and ideas that justify the use of violence. By contrast, disengagement is a change in behaviour away from engagement in violence or extremist groups. Disengagement can involve disavowing the group, but can also include a change of role or move to a less active role within a group. Crucially, disengagement can occur without a change in the views, values or norms of the individual or group other than in relation to the use of

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<sup>5</sup> Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009) "Deradicalisation of right-wing radicals and Islamic radicals" in Jaap van Donselaar and Peter R. Rodrigues (eds.), *Monitor racism & extremism : achtste rapportage*, Amsterdam : Anne Frank Stichting ; Leiden : Universiteit Leiden, English translation of the chapter available at <http://www.annefrank.org/content.asp?PID=867&LID=2> [accessed 23 September 2009].

<sup>6</sup> Buijs, F. J., Demant, F. & Hamdy, A., (2006) *Strijders van eigen bodem. "Radical en democratische moslims in Nederland."* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Cited in Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Klandermans, B. & Mayer, N. (eds.), (2006) *"Extreme right activists in Europe: Through the magnifying glass,"* New York: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Bjørge T., & J. Horgan (eds.), (2008) *"Leaving terrorism behind: individual and collective disengagement,"* New York & London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Noricks, Darcy M.E., (2009) "The Root Causes of Terrorism," in Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation. As of January 17, 2009: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG849/>.

<sup>10</sup> Noricks, Darcy M.E., (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Horgan, J., (2007) "Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective," in Magnus Ranstorp, (ed.), *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, London and New York: Routledge.



violence for achieving its ends. Furthermore, both deradicalisation and disengagement can occur at the group or individual level.<sup>12</sup>

As noted above, the European Commission's definition of violent radicalisation includes both behaviours and attitudes. A wide range of behaviours or attitudes can be identified as signifying radicalisation or deradicalisation. A distinction can be made between deradicalisation of *activities and views*. This distinction places violence at one end of the behavioural spectrum, below which lie other behaviours including membership of a group that supports violence, comments and espousal of views, leafleting, demonstrating, listening to radical preachers or reading radical literature.<sup>13</sup> In this context deradicalisation of 'behaviour is concerned [with the] suspension of (violent) radical activities and the cessation of radical comments and displays' while the deradicalisation of views includes 'trust in the system, a desire to be part of society once more and the rejection of non-democratic means' of action.<sup>14</sup>

In line with this distinction between disengagement and deradicalisation former extremists in discussion and interviews suggested that in their experience while individuals may disengage from an organisation or movement because they question its relevance to the wider movement and society, they may continue to support the ideas of the organisation or movement but not its actions. This suggests that the needs of those who have disengaged from extremist movements or organisations but continue to hold some extremist views are different from those that have rejected an organisation and movement as well as its underlying ideas. It also highlights the need in developing a network of former extremists that ensures clarity about membership criteria.

### 2.3 Triggers for Leaving

Three types of factors have been identified as playing a role in leading people to leave extremist organisations or movements. These are referred to as affective, normative, and continuance factors.<sup>15</sup> The affective factor comes into play where an individual is 'disillusioned with the group dynamic and the activities of the movement'. The normative factor relates to the ideology of the group. Deradicalisation occurs if there is a failing ideology, and the individual is no longer convinced by the ideology, its vision of an ideal society is no longer appealing. The continuance factors are those that lead individuals to leave an organisation or movement out of the desire for a more 'ordinary' family life.

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<sup>12</sup> There is also a further distinction made between 'group' deradicalisation and 'organizational' deradicalisation, the latter occurring where an organization makes a move away from violence without fragmenting into splinter groups (Ashour, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

The interviewees were asked to reflect on what they felt were the triggers for their decision to leave extremist organisations or movements. The interviews indicate that direct *experience of violence* and the consequences of violence either witnessed or perpetrated is a crucial moment that triggers doubts about extremist organisations leading to disillusionment. Even in the absence of direct experiences of violence, individual doubts can begin where there is a *dissonance between the group's attitudes towards violence and the individual's own feelings about violence*. As an individual reflects on the group's moral framework on violence s/he may feel uneasy with the conclusions reached:

“...it is obvious that killing innocent people is wrong. The fact that you are surrounded by people who need a religious verdict to justify that becomes problematic. And that is when you start to doubt yourself; you start to doubt whether you have any sense of morality, because you lost your moral compass. And that is one of the things that pushes you out, you realise that it is amoral. It is not wrong; it is just that even though you have a moral compass as a human being you are starting to lose that clarity. Because it has been left to some structural perspective.”

The interview findings here are consistent with existing research which suggests that experiences of trauma, in particular revulsion from seeing violence up close or involvement in violence are important triggers for disengagement or deradicalisation. They create an opening in which an individual reassesses or reinterprets their framework for understanding their world. It is at these points that inducements and incentives to leave the group can be important. There is, however, a restricted window of opportunity during which any inducements or incentives to leave an extremist group can have an effect. Given enough time the organisation or movement is able to justify the need for the violence, thus weakening the role of the inducements.<sup>16</sup>

The interviews with former extremists suggest that for some, the *constant negativity* of the organisation toward wider society and the world combined with a lack of a positive sense of spiritual support was often a source of stress and disillusionment. The impact of this negativity was described in terms of feeling worn down: “Everything was Kufr!<sup>17</sup> We were told to strike fear in people's hearts, and that made me feel that my spiritual needs were not being fulfilled.” For others the *internal intolerance and authoritarianism* of the organisation plays a role. This was particularly true for individuals in organisations where they felt under surveillance from the group, or were denounced or attacked for failing to live up to the requirements of the group. This is consistent with existing research which suggests that alongside revulsion from confrontation with violence, disillusionment and stress can

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<sup>16</sup> Decker, Scott H., and Barrik Van Winkle, (1996) “*Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*,” Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Unbelief. An Islamic term used to denote something that is not of the faith.

trigger cognitive openings that lead individuals to question their involvement in extremist groups or movements.<sup>18</sup>

The interviews indicate that individuals with negative experiences prior to joining the group or movement begin to question their involvement after *positive experiences in mainstream society*. For some interviewees *empathy and support by someone outside the group* at the point at which doubts develop is important to leaving: “I did write a letter to a friend, and she said that something that is affecting your iman<sup>19</sup> is not something from Islam. So that was when I decided that I had had enough.” This is consistent with existing research which shows that positive personal relationships and interactions can also play an important role in triggering change. The doubts about membership of an extremist organisation can arise from positive experiences of compassion from those viewed as the enemy or hated other “recognition of the shared humanity of the ‘enemy’ was a difficult step that had to be repeated over and over throughout the lengthy move from violence to nonviolence”.<sup>20</sup>

For other interviewees, normative factors were more important. In particular the *inconsistencies in the ideology* and the dissatisfaction with response to intellectual questions triggered the process of doubting the group’s ideology. The research literature suggests that the process of questioning of a group or movement’s ideology can be particularly acute when it comes from a respected or trusted figure; from “people whom the radical trusts and respects, and who enter into ideological discussion with the radical”.<sup>21</sup> It is suggested that “when the radical is (slightly) open to the opinion of this person/these people, it is possible that he or she may be influenced by the other person(s) and that they trigger a process of doubt about the radical’s own ideology”.<sup>22</sup>

Discussions with former extremists also confirm that individuals often leave extremist organisations and movements because they simply feel they have no need for the organisation anymore – that they are *going into a different phase of their life* where priorities have changed – where daily (family) and work life take priority. This is consistent with existing research which suggests that individuals may find the social cost of membership of an extremist group (stigmatization or threats of criminal proceedings) outweigh any benefits, particularly as members become older and want to have a more ‘ordinary’ family life: “many former adherents of radical movements name factors such as growing away from the movement, assuming responsibilities and wanting to build their own lives as factors

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<sup>18</sup> Fink, N.C. and E.B. Hearne, (2008) “*Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism*,” International Peace Institute.

<sup>19</sup> Faith. An Islamic term.

<sup>20</sup> Garfinkel, R., (2007) *Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace*, USIP special report no.186. Washington, DC.

<sup>21</sup> Demant, F., M Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2008) “*Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation*,” Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

that played a role in their deradicalisation”.<sup>23</sup> This is also consistent with research on those leaving far right groups which indicate that longing for a “normal” life outside the group can be triggered by increasing age, pressure from partners and families, or desire to engage in alternative occupations less threatening to long term socio-economic prospects.<sup>24</sup> For individuals that are thinking of leaving extremist groups or organisations the existence of support services for reintegrating into mainstream society may facilitate their decision to leave.

## 2.4 Barriers to leaving

In identifying barriers to leaving interviewees described how their group or movement became their key social support network. As one interviewee noted “all your family and friends and environment are [in the group], so it is hard to get away from that”. Interviewees that were members of groups found themselves isolated from former friends and family, this in turn generated a *fear of the isolation* that would occur if they left the group. For some this was a significant barrier to leaving. As one interviewee noted “the barrier is the feeling that you are going to be alone. That you are the only person feeling this” the interviewee stressed the importance of “support for these people to show them that they are not alone”. In this context, encounters with empathic outsiders or reengagement with family can be important to overcoming these barriers: “My family was the only support system I had. So I was lucky. I had friends and neighbours to draw upon. Others may not have this”. Leaving a group is particularly difficult where individuals have *joined with partners*. “The main barriers were the emotional, family... The problem is when it involves families...that is the main problem”. In some instances couples leave together; in other instances the break from the group involves a breakup of the relationship. The interviewees all referred to the *lack of support* for them when they were considering leaving. The interviews suggest that empathy and support by someone outside the group at the point at which doubts develop is important to leaving.

These interview findings are consistent with existing research which emphasises the extent to which radicalisation involves withdrawal from society and a break with existing social ties as well as the intensification of ties within the group. This group dynamic is critical to radicalisation and in understanding the barriers to deradicalisation. As an individual becomes increasingly isolated from wider social ties and increases their dependence on the group, so fear of the social isolation on leaving becomes a barrier to exiting the group: “[b]efore they leave, most people go through a fierce internal struggle. The outside world has become the great unknown where they no longer know how to make their way, and they are afraid of landing in a moral vacuum”.<sup>25</sup> The decision to leave a group is usually a deeply personal decision that leaves the individual isolated from their former social

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Fink, N.C. and E.B. Hearne, (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009).

circles and networks.<sup>26</sup> Those who leave radical groups are leaving their social support network and may find themselves without the social ties needed to sustain their decision to disengage.<sup>27</sup> The *absence of a receiving group* may form an important barrier to exiting the group.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.5 Addressing Barriers

The importance of support from those outside the group is also found in case studies of exit strategies from far right groups in Norway. These suggest that the involvement of parents was particularly important and effective. Parents were also able to share information with other parents.<sup>29</sup> The research also suggests that former activists from extremist groups can play an important role in interventions targeted at young people involved in far right groups.<sup>30</sup> These programmes treat the issues of involvement in far right groups as largely driven by emotional and social needs of individuals for bonding and identity.

Some of the interviewees for this research also felt that through their experience as former members of extremist organisations they had an acute understanding and empathy of the vulnerability of those that remain involved. They knew from their personal relationships in these networks the personal histories and motivations of those that joined. One interviewee mentioned that in his experiences those that had become radicalised were people who had “suffered the most horrendous things, like having crack addicts for mothers...went into care, suffered the worst abuse”. It leaves them to emphasise the need for compassion toward those that are involved: “I think it is all about love and unity, and some of these people, I find, did not get that love from their families. So I think it [encouraging exiting] is about getting that love back from them. We also need to educate their families.”

For other interviewees, however the support they were looking for centred on addressing *the intellectual questions that persist*. While the organisation could not give satisfactory answers to their questions, its ideas continued to provide a powerful paradigm for understanding and interpreting experiences:

“What we learnt from literature, we haven’t been given a counter narrative to that. Now I am out, I am still searching for some of the answers to what I have been taught. But there

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<sup>26</sup> Garfinkel, R., (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Bjorgo, T., (2006) “Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Extremist Groups: The Case of Racist Sub-Cultures,” in Cheryl Benard, (ed.), *A Future for the Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, WR-354, 2006. As of January 21, 2009: [http://www.rand.org/pubs/working\\_papers/WR354/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR354/).

<sup>28</sup> Decker, Scott H., and Barrik Van Winkle, (1996).

<sup>29</sup> Fink, N.C. and E.B. Hearne, (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009).

was no literature for me to go to and get answers about this and that verse. I now feel confident though, but not when I came out. I needed Islamic development when I came out.”

This also meant having to manage *feeling guilty*. Some were made to feel that they were failing in their religious duty if they were not working for the group’s cause: “They tried to stop me. Saying it was a fardh,<sup>31</sup> trying to establish the [Islamic] state”. The discussions also indicated that in some instances individuals felt conflicting emotions between wanting to leave and guilt about leaving. This, it was suggested, sometimes led individuals to stay in the organisation out of loyalty and to try to change the organisation from within. There was also *fear of “abuse”* from members, although it was felt that this was less likely to occur if they left quietly.

The interviews suggest that leaving involves an individual challenging and changing their ideological outlook as well as an emotional process. One interviewee talked in terms of the need to reconcile both his ‘ideas’ and ‘emotions’. The process of leaving was gradual: “It took several years of questioning, debating, discussion, learning, moving on. It wasn’t overnight...intellectually and emotionally I had to completely rid myself of [the group]”. The intersection between the two occurs in particular in the need to reconcile abandoning the group with continued fidelity to their faith. There was reference to overcoming feelings of guilt about no longer working for the cause: “You have to reconcile how you feel about what you are doing as well as your religiosity”. For some leaving is a gradual process for others it can happen quite rapidly. However, it is suggested that those that leave rapidly, particularly if they have been involved for a considerable period of time, still require support in so far as they have not addressed the emotional and intellectual issues involved in leaving. The need for addressing ideological concerns is addressed in deradicalisation programmes found in the Middle East. These often involve normative re-education and view the problem as primarily ideological, and place greater emphasis on a mistaken interpretation of Islam. Much of the focus is therefore on ensuring that individuals have the correct interpretation. It is however too early to assess the effectiveness of these programmes.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions

While there is now a growing body of work on the process of radicalisation and the reasons for people joining, our understanding of how and why people leave, or even of what “leaving” means remain areas that require further research. There is little known about those who hold views and attitudes similar to those involved in radical groups or organisations but who are not active

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<sup>31</sup> A religious obligation.

<sup>32</sup> Demant, F., M. Sloodman, F. Buijs and J. Tillie, (2009).

participants in any group or organisation but rather see themselves as part of a movement. Further research is needed to understand the kinds of support or interventions such individuals would need.

The analysis in this report suggests that there is a need for support services directed at those that are questioning their involvement in extremist groups, organisations or movements and thinking about leaving such groups or movements. Support for individuals thinking about leaving can be directed at two distinct areas: intellectual and emotional.

*Intellectual support* would assist individuals thinking about stepping away from extremist organisations in addressing doubts they have about the organisations beliefs and ideology. It can also help individuals address feelings of guilt and reassure them that in leaving an extremist organisation and abandoning its aims and objectives, they are not abandoning their faith.

*Emotional support* is needed to help individuals overcome fears of isolation on leaving an extremist group and to help reintegration into mainstream society. This may involve re-integration into the 'mainstream' of Muslim communities as well as wider European societies. Further research is needed to understand the interaction between the provision of intellectual and emotional support. Different approaches are likely to be needed for each of these.

### 3. Possibilities for a network of former members of extremist organisations or movements

Any initiative to support people wanting to leave extremist organisations or movements would benefit from the involvement of those that have been involved in such groups. They have an insight, empathy and understanding of the intellectual and emotional opportunities and barriers involved in exiting extremist movements and are sometimes already engaged in initiatives that can be positively harnessed within a larger pan-European sharing and implementation of best and innovative deradicalisation practice.

#### *3.1 A network of former extremists: opportunities and challenges*

Interviewees were asked about the potential role that they felt former members of extremist organisations could play in assisting individuals leaving extreme groups. For some the desire for social change and anger at injustice that motivated initial involvement remains and there is a desire to continue participating in movements or organisations that aim to bring about change. The change they now wish to bring about is countering radicalisation and de-legitimising violent extremism. They feel that they can contribute to this by helping those who wish to leave extremist groups or movements. For many their understanding and empathy for those who become involved with and remain in extremist organisations was a motivating factor for involvement in a network.

While some were positive about playing a role in a formal or informal network of former extremists, the interviews identify significant obstacles to the development of any formal network, structure or organisation that would link them together:

- The diversity of paths taken by different individuals meant that they differed in their position and analysis of where the key problems or challenges lie;
- Some feared that a public or high profile role would make them the target of attention from current and former members of existing groups;
- There was also considerable concern and suspicion about being co-opted by government into wider agendas they did not support.

Discussion with practitioners, policymakers and community stakeholders suggests that:



- The emotional and intellectual support for those already thinking about leaving must be kept distinct from work that aims to challenge the views and beliefs of extremist organisations and movements;
- The legitimacy and effectiveness of support services depends on them being independent of government counter terrorism policy and is likely to be most effective if it is a community led initiative with support from a broad range of community stakeholders.

Those interviewed largely welcomed the opportunities to support those going through similar experiences to their own, but many had concerns about:

- Publicity surrounding any involvement;
- Participation that created formal links to others that have left extremist organisations where they have taken very different paths after stepping out of extremist organisations.

Any initiative would therefore need to:

- Take into consideration their anxieties about security and privacy, as well as;
- Overcome concerns about the agenda or motivations of those involved.

There was significant support amongst interviewees for developing a network of former extremists, which working together with practitioners and community activists would act as a working group to develop support services available to those thinking of leaving extremist movements and organisations. It was envisioned that the network would expand as some of the individuals leaving extremist groups or movements joined the network.

### *3.2 Proposals*

Critical to the success of any initiative is reaching those thinking of leaving extremist groups and movements. An internet based platform was identified as likely to be the most effective tool for outreach. The website would provide information addressing common questions and concerns faced by individuals thinking of leaving as well as testimonials about the personal experiences of those that have left. It would therefore present avenues to find answers to ideological questions, and assist access to social networks and events which can address some of the emotional and intellectual questions or issues that individuals may have. It would also provide space for web based support services such as web chats, which are increasingly used by organisations that provide traditional phone based support services such as Childline and the Muslim Youth Helpline. There is also great

potential for developing a range of complimentary offline support services. These include services aimed at providing confidential counselling or advice such as a telephone helpline, personal befriending service, support groups. Provision will also include public forums that act as 'safe spaces' for former extremists, targeted debates and talks in which questions, concerns and doubts about membership in extremist groups and movements can be raised. In particular, it was argued that there was a need for spaces in which the illegitimacy and use of violence can be discussed and debated.

Given adequate resources and drawing on best practice models and innovative ideas from across Europe, the majority of the individuals involved in this research are willing to form a working group to develop support services for people wanting to leave extreme organisations in multiple European countries. Some are already involved in developing local initiatives that meet some of the needs identified in the research, for example a mosque that explicitly deals with and addresses the questions that members of extremist groups raise when they begin to question the groups ideas.

## **Conclusions**

This study has identified the need for emotional and intellectual support for those thinking of leaving extremist groups and movements and provides some clear indications of the shape and focus of the proposed initiatives. With a unique insight, empathy and understanding of the intellectual and emotional opportunities and barriers involved in exiting extremist movements, former members of extremist organisations and movements are an important resource for any initiative aimed at supporting people wanting to leave extremist organisations or movements. This study has identified a key group of former members of violent movements, as well as community workers and experts in Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, who are willing to continue as a working group on the proposed initiatives. Further scoping work is needed to develop a full project proposal which identifies and outlines the details of support services to be developed in this area, confirms costings and identifies potential partners that might want to be involved. Finally, the development of a network of former extremists can also make an important contribution in addressing the knowledge gap in our understanding of the impact of counter terrorism policy created by limited data on the rate and trends in defection from extremist organisations.

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## 5. Appendix 1: Network of Former Extremists Workshop Agenda

### Workshop: supporting exit strategies from extremist organisations

Saturday 26 September 2009

Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London

Former member of extremist and radical organisations can play an important role in countering radicalisation and extremism, through either utilising their knowledge to directly challenge the extremist narrative or learning from their experiences as to why they joined the extremist group in the first place and what subsequently caused them to leave. Such individuals, or people with similar experiences, are well placed to assess the methods one can use to effectively support the de-radicalisation process.

The workshop will discuss the findings of recent research conducted on this topic by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Through interviewing a number of former members of politically violent organisations the research looked at the reasons people joined radical organisations and their motivations for leaving.

The aim of the roundtable is to gain critical and constructive feedback on the report's main findings and central recommendations.

It will explore the different forms supporting exit from extremist organisation might take, which may include a forum based website that allows anonymous debate on a number of issues, or an information based website that will contain articles and resources offering support for exit and explores and challenges the extremist narrative.

#### **The outline of the day will be as follows:**

**10.00 – 10.30:** Introductions

**10.30 – 11.30:** Presentation and feedback on the findings of the research. The presentation will outline:

- Popular motivations that were cited as reasons for people to join radical political organisations;
- Popular motivations that were cited as reasons for people to leave radical political organisations;
- The type of mechanisms that might help people who are susceptible to, or are already involved in, radical political organisations.

**11.30-11.45:** Coffee and Tea break

**11.45 - 1.15:** Chaired by Sofia Hamaz, this session's discussions will explore:

- Means to provide support for people who have left or wish to leave extremist organisations;
- The feasibility of creating an online network/forum/website for and by former members of radical political organisations that might support people who have left or might want to leave radical political organisations;
- The desired outcomes and possible partners of such a project;
- Potential difficulties that such a project may encounter.

**1.15 – 3.00pm:** Lunch at a local restaurant with a discussion on means of challenging extremist ideology. Chaired by Ghaffar Hussain.

### **Website Concept**

From our experiences in interviewing former members of radical political organisations and gaining their thoughts on the idea of creating a network of 'former radicals', it has become clear that the idea of creating such as network is difficult and possibly unworkable. Many of the interviewees were reluctant to form any sort of public group, with many arguing that after leaving radical political organisations many people would rather resume having a 'normal life' and not want to assume a public role as a 'former radical'.

It therefore becomes evident that a more anonymous platform is required, such as an online forum, or an information based website, where former members of politically radical organisations can correspond and share experiences and information. The web platform would also serve as referral points for people who might consider leaving politically radical organisations. In this way no formal group needs to be formed and target individuals can contribute to the website as and when they are able and willing.

This website can incorporate either one or more of the following components:

**A blog/forum** – Former members of politically radical organisations can post their experiences and ideas on the website and engage in debate/conversation with people who are thinking of leaving politically violent organisations. The main section of this sort of a website might be a 'Q and A' section, where difficult questions from people who are in the process of being, or have been, radicalised can be answered.

**Information pages** – Providing online resources (articles, textual references) for people who may wish to leave extremism, ultimately becoming a support mechanism for vulnerable people.