

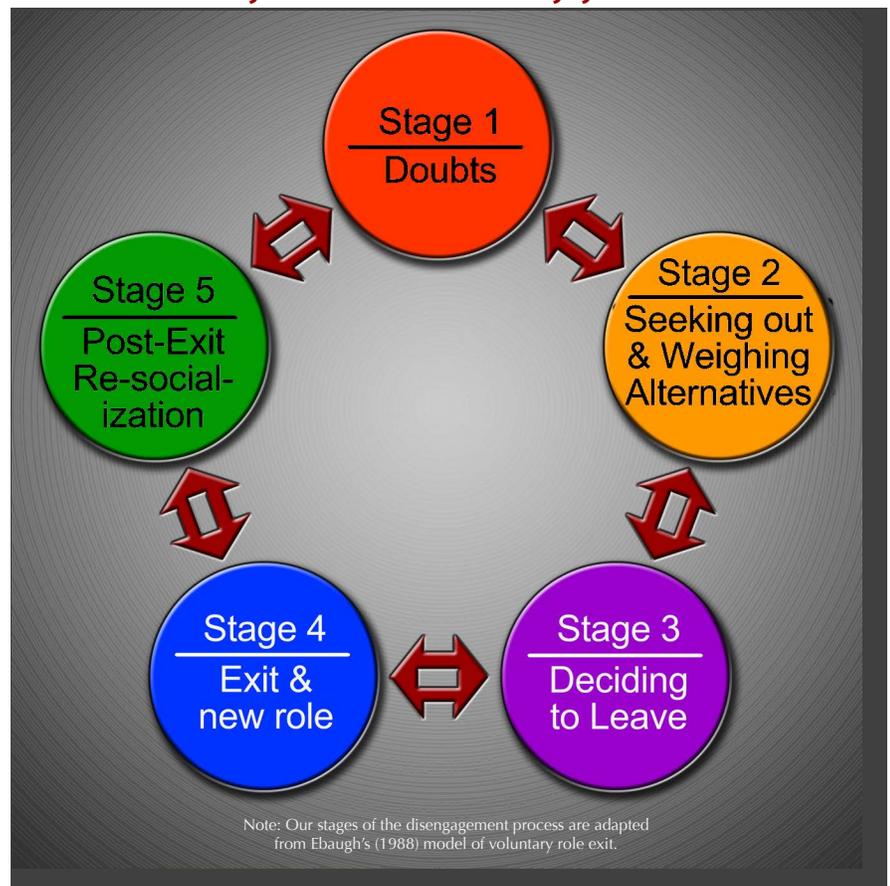


Disengagement Case Study: Ahmed's Story

Ahmed* joined a terrorist organization at the age of 15. When he entered the organization he had "absolutely no expectations" about what his involvement would entail. In his words:

It was like Boy Scouts... I mean it was like boy soldiers. My best friend came past me on the street and said, 'You know, I'm going to join the [terrorist organization] tomorrow.' It sounded like some exciting adventure... even when they [older members] had given this talk to the first big bunch of us that joined up and they were saying, 'Look you have nothing to look forward to...nothing but prison, years of trouble or death.' But, you know we didn't even comprehend what they were talking about because we had no concept of prison, no concept of war, no concept of struggle, no concept of death. We were all going to live forever... The expectations were childish and completely unrelated to reality. It was like a game... like an adventure game... It was ignorant kids being groomed.

Common Stages of the Terrorist Disengagement Process



** In order to protect the identity of the individual on which this brief is based, all identifying information has been removed and the individual's real name is not used.*

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Project and Executive Summaries found at
icst.psu.edu/research.shtml

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Stage 1
Doubts

Once Ahmed was involved, he began to experience doubts about his involvement. These doubts revolved around the reality that his involvement might result in death. Ahmed recalls the start of these doubts:

It was only when we lost friends who were shot dead, that it began... even when they were shot dead, it was so inconceivable, it didn't sink in for months. I remember when my friend [name] was killed, it didn't sink in to me for months that he had been killed, I couldn't even conceive. I was 16... It took me 6 months or more even to realize the finality of death and the fact they died and they weren't coming back. Only then you began to realize when you're already in the organization quite deeply, that there is a certain finality here that when I go out today, I might not be coming back this evening.

As Ahmed became more and more involved in the terrorist organization, these doubts continued to grow and revolved around not only the reality of a very probable death, but also the fact that certain individuals he met within the leadership of the terrorist organization were, in his words, "psychopathic." Ahmed explains:

The higher I went in the organization, the more people I met who were, I felt, kind of psychopathic to be honest. At the local level you never met them but when I began to be employed by [the executive of the organization] you know to go to [do explosive operations]. It was at that level that I began to meet people that I felt were absolutely psychopathic. One very well-known commander who was in control of operations... I felt the guy... from the first second I met him, I thought he was a psychopath. I remember once he asked me, to—I was quite young, you know, 18—he sent me over to Belgium to shoot some arms dealer... I ended up in Belgium as a teenager with a gun being told to meet this guy and, you know, kill him cause he sold out [the terrorist organization]. And I remember thinking, you know it's one thing to use bombs and explosives from a distance, but here I am being sort of asked to execute some guy, and I met a third party along the way from [city] who told me he felt this guy was innocent, so when I met the guy in Belgium, I didn't shoot him, came back to [city], and told them, but the guy I believed was a psychopath pulled a gun on me, put it against my head... I started a sentence to him, 'Well I thought...' He burst in and said 'You don't think. I do the [expletive] thinking. You don't think, you do.' From that moment I realized there were some people in control here who were complete psychopaths.

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Stage 2
Seeking out
& Weighing
Alternatives

When entertaining doubts about his involvement and admitting a certain level of disillusionment, Ahmed began to think about ways that he could potentially leave the terrorist organization. However, Ahmed explains that unlike some other members of his organization who could easily walk away for family reasons or because they didn't possess "the grit and determination" (e.g., couldn't stomach the violence, the clandestine life), leaving for him was actually much more difficult. He had successfully carried out operations, and his disillusionment centered on the organization's ideology:

You see I wouldn't have been in the category of somebody who needed to leave. Here they'd be looking at somebody who was quite active, fully gritty, and determined, and... it would've been quite difficult to pop your head above the part and say I have a fundamental disagreement with the aims and philosophy and ideology of the organization... There were no rules or rubrics for how people were going to be facilitated in that area [i.e., leaving the terrorist organization because they no longer agreed with its underlying ideology].

Moreover, Ahmed suggests that it was much harder for him to leave and begin a conventional life than, for instance, it was for a commander who had only ordered attacks. Due to his direct perpetration of terrorist attacks, Ahmed worried about the possibility that forensic evidence would result in his prosecution and conviction. Ahmed elaborates:

It was possible for very, very prominent people to work their way out, you know, but you see it was easier if they were more involved in the command structure and hadn't been in the physical jobs front... like they hadn't been in the actual operations. They might have ordered the operations where they were more morally and legally responsible than the young person they sent out to do the job, but for somebody like me who was the front-line activist, who made, planted or carried the [explosive]... For me the options to get out without necessarily going over to the enemy, you were kind of constrained by that.



It was when Ahmed was conducting operations for the terrorist organization abroad, in Europe, that he most seriously entertained the idea of leaving and considered his alternatives. He explains:

I quite frequently wondered if I was trying to get out of [the terrorist organization] where could I go. I was too deep in, in terms of activism and jobs done. You know I was just, was well, in their terms, a quite sophisticated explosives user, quite safe and determined, could do jobs abroad and travel and so on, but I remember thinking when I was in London and also when I was in Europe in Holland, Belgium, Germany doing a bit of traveling for [the terrorist organization], I remember wondering if I want to get out without necessarily having to connect with the enemy... I often wondered if there had been some Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish or a peace organization that said if you give it up we'll facilitate you to get out, and it wouldn't even necessarily have to have guaranteed that in due course in the future one wouldn't come before the courts or anything—that wasn't the issue. The issue was more for the young people like me who were active at the time, the whole issue was how can I give this up in such a way that I can, you know, kind of get out of it kind of cleanly... It was that time I came the closest to saying I'm a hair's breath from being able to just disappear. Trying to merge into society there, use a false name, whatever...

Ahmed further explains how this time away from the everyday life of being in the organization gave him the opportunity to entertain his doubts and consider possible exit routes:

When I was in [homeland], I was active everyday... to have this period of kind of holiday almost... time to think, seeing normal life abroad, seeing people my age, 18, going to university, drive up to Paris or something just to look around, you think I'm so close to just being able to disappear. And so far as you contact your family from time to time, they would be desperate for you to leave, but the mechanism wasn't there.

Ahmed did, in fact, come very close to leaving while abroad, but he remembers that he was quickly pulled back into the terrorist organization after an unexpected return visit home:

I remember sitting in Holland for a few months thinking, you know, I could just stay here, get the hell out of it, disappear here, never get involved again. And I was very, very close to that, but I remember that I read the paper and there was some attack... that killed 2 [members of the terrorist organization]... and I, in some teenage nonsensical view of the age at 18, went back not to actually attend the funeral but to be around at the time these people were killed, and I got sucked back into it.

Stage 3
Deciding
to Leave

At the age of 20, Ahmed was arrested and decided to act on his doubts and disillusionment, doubts that had been simmering for more than 4 years. He explains the overwhelming sense of relief he felt at the time of his arrest:

I remember when I was arrested and was in the police station, when the police were trying to interrogate me, they didn't realize that there was this—it was like a Niagara Falls of relief—and my mind went into this cool zone of intense relief because as I was sitting there, my mind far away from the interrogation, taking no part in it whatsoever, my mind was thinking, 'My God, I've survived, I've been captured, I never expected to...' They must have been wondering why this guy wasn't responding to interrogation at all. I was sitting there going—[expletive] I'm alive. But it's curious with the belief too—it's a sign that people often don't appreciate the fact that the [terrorist] that they've captured may have been looking for a way out.

When Ahmed entered prison, he quickly learned during interrogation that his terrorist organization had been engaging in deliberate attacks against civilians and hiding such attacks from certain cells and members. He explains how these actions helped compel him to finally leave the organization:

There were some unique stand-alone factors, each of which propelled me to leave [the terrorist organization] equally. The fact that they came sequentially added to it... I was in my youthful, you know, justice-seeking notion, when I arrived in [name] prison for a few short weeks... and when I discovered [members of his terrorist organization] were actually shooting [civilians], I just couldn't even conceive of it... In [his terrorist cell], there wasn't anybody who thought that happened. We were so isolated from what the reality was in [larger city]... I think it was the realization that [the terrorist organization] lied to its own people... that was a shocking thing for me... that struck me as a point of no return. That one. That, for me, that was the moment that I realized, I couldn't. I was too shocked that the organization would lie to its own people in [city], to me, to hundreds of people throughout the country. I just thought, 'My God, if it's prepared to do this, what's it not prepared to do.' I think that, for me, was the fundamental thing.

Ahmed's doubts about his involvement and his desire to possibly leave the organization caused him to engage in activities that would land him in solitary confinement while in prison. He explains that these actions were taken as much for "the cause" as to guarantee him seclusion from other terrorist prisoners. He elaborates:

It [solitary] gave me freedom to think alone, and I was very conscious during the period that I was in the solitary that it was a blessing and a relief to be there. That's where I was able to follow my own conscience... When you read the prison rules to read what your rights are under certain laws, you begin thinking about where did these originate... but when I was looking at these rights, suddenly I

was looking at human rights... and then I got into the Geneva Convention and why people want to create restrictions around war... I began to look at that and think, 'Here we are, the [terrorists], who have been in prison, immediately turning our attention to rights,' and I thought, 'Here we are making claims to rights, while our organization... has effectively blinded itself to the fact that it's got a list of human rights violations longer than I can even conceive of...' I was cornered very quickly by the logic of human rights, civil rights.



Stage 4
Exit &
new role

Finally, Ahmed decided to formally exit the terrorist organization through, in his words, "religious conversion," or more accurately, a recognition of respect for fundamental human rights and the realization that his terrorist organization had violated these rights through their use of violence. He explains that the way in which he exited the organization was ultimately very risky:

It was dangerous, risky... To announce this change through the kind of prisoner lens or explanation of religious conversion was a very dangerous thing to me because some of the other prisoners there, very prominent dangerous prisoners... discussed in the prison that I was going to become potentially [a spy], and discussed killing me. Far from taking the easy way out, I ended up choosing this really far too honest, far too simplistic conscience thinking... The majority of prisoners didn't speak to me for 8 years.

However, for Ahmed, it was the same commitment and determination that made him a successful terrorist, which gave him the courage to leave. He mentions:

It was the grit and determination under a new light. I didn't care. I didn't give a damn. I mean I was living with people in prison who could kill me, some of them wanted to. I was living with people who would shut me out for the next 8 years, didn't speak to me, didn't look at me. You require an amazing internal grit... even by that time I was wondering, 'Where did this come from this grit and determination to stand alone...' But there's a terrible inevitability about it. I could see this coming, this leaving [the terrorist organization] coming. I'd almost preferred to do it outside [prison], if I could have walked away... I think there was an inevitability about getting out.

Stage 5
Post-Exit
Re-social-
ization

Ahmed was eventually released from prison after 14 years and enrolled in school. Today, he works in a conventional job, actively seeks to promote terrorist disengagement, and engages in voluntary community service activities. He recently married and is living, quite happily, in society.

Would you like to learn more about terrorist disengagement? If so, please visit:
<http://www.icst.psu.edu/Research.shtml>