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Analysis of Social Networks and Peer Contagion in Terrorism-Related Offences in Indonesia

Heru Susetyo [a] ✉, **Reisa Suci Arimbi** [b], **Morten Koch Andersen** [c], **Shr-Jie Wang** [d]

[a] Professor of Law, Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia
[b] Research Assistant of DIGNITY Project & Alumnae of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia
[c] Director of Research and Education at Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Denmark
[d] Senior researcher/epidemiologist/adjunct associate professor, Danish Institute against Torture (DIGNITY), Denmark

✉ corresponding email: hsusetyo@ui.ac.id

Abstract

This article addresses a timely and important issue: terrorism recruitment and disengagement in the digital era. It explores the intricate dynamics of social networks and peer contagion and their role in processes of recruitment and disengagement in terrorism activities in Indonesia. It emphasizes on how close relations and peers significantly influence young individual behavior, often facilitated through digital spaces; social media, encrypted chat groups, and other content-sharing platforms, and explores potential avenues for prevention and disengagement. The research is based on in-depth interviews with 20 former inmates convicted of acts of terrorism between 2023 and 2025 in the greater Jakarta and west Java region, Indonesia. The finding highlights that social networks serve as critical outreach platforms, especially for the young people, for disseminating extremist ideologies, sharing biased information and propaganda content, and serve to promote recruitment for violent activities. It

demonstrates how communication and information sharing via digital spaces platforms plays a crucial role in shaping the processes that lead young individuals towards violent ideologies and practices. In addition, we observed that on one hand peer influence plays a pivotal role in enabling recruitment but on the other hand for prevention and disengagement efforts; although, antisocial and violent behavior spreads more readily than prosocial behavior among peers. Analysis indicate that a clear understanding of the structure of these social networks and their dynamics, as well as the mechanisms of peer contagion is essential for developing effective preventive strategies and targeted interventions. Importantly, these findings have broader practical implications, which not only provides insights of contextual complexities of recruitment and disengagement that could inform future research , but also for policymakers and practitioners who could translate this knowledge into policies and develop interventions that strengthen protective social ties, foster trust and support among peers, and guide the responsible use of digital spaces in Indonesia, and beyond. Ultimately, this study recommends revising the terrorism law in Indonesia regarding digital literacy and responsible supervision of digital space to prevent the spread of radicalism through digital space.

Keywords
Social Network, Peer Contagion, Terrorist, Indonesian, Youth.

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Introduction

The participation of young individuals as perpetrators of violence is a defining feature of Indonesia's recent history of political extremism. Violent organizations' influence and deliberate efforts to push individuals towards extremist ideologies and criminal mindsets, is an on-going societal challenge. A challenge that is deepening in the wake of the rapid and expansive digital transformation, especially among the younger population.[1]

The proliferation of the internet, social media, encrypted chat groups, and other content-sharing platforms have made it easier for political extreme organisations to communicate, share information and reach individuals at risk. Young individuals going through a period marked by heightened vulnerability to peer influence, identity exploration and ideological persuasion. The widespread use of digital tools, specifically social media platforms has opened a new frontier for outreach and recruitment with significant implications for those susceptible to biased information and simplified political messaging.

However, the intent to influence young individuals towards violence, is shaped in the intersection of individual and contextual factors; such as personal histories, sentiments, perceptions, values, and; digital access, friends, education etc. As such, we should not conflate processes of engagement and radicalization with a generalisable, predictable and linear development. Therefore, we should avoid a linear model of analysis, when seeking to understand and ultimately prevent motivations for violence. As such, we on one hand, recognises the fluidity of identity making, and the need for nuanced, yet particular understanding of violent extremism as individualised processes, and on the other hand, we emphasise social environments and norms as key enablers and facilitators, of both engagement and disengagement.

Thus, while paying attention to the role of social environments in facilitating or inhibiting political extreme tendencies, as the backdrop of radicalised discourses, perceptions and sentiments - as well as their

[1] We use an expansive youth category up to 35 years. See, https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf

broader social rejection and acceptance - we argue for context-sensitive approaches to countering violent extremism that addresses the specific situations of the youth at risk.

So, in order to understand the individual dynamics of engagement and disengagement, we examine the role of peers, the use of digital platforms and the workings of the violent networks outreach. We approach the individuals' progression towards political extreme ideologies and actions, and their rejection, through the insights of people who have left violent pathways, illuminating their encounter to biased information, the outreach, the processes of recruitment and radicalisation, and the potentials for disengagement and prevention. This provides essential guidance for future research, policy-making and intervention development.

The following is an analysis of how social networks serve as critical platforms for the dissemination of extremist ideas, sharing of biased information and propaganda content promoting violent engagement. An important aspect is that we look at how through networked interactions individuals accept and legitimise violence, and how peer influence plays a pivotal role in enabling recruitment as well as in the processes that turn individuals away from violent ideologies, potentialities and practices. The final section offers conclusions and suggests areas of further research and avenues for future prevention efforts.

The study is part of a larger research program, "Addressing Wellbeing and Security Needs in Urban Children and Adolescents in the Digital Era", funded by Foundation Botnar and the Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY) during 2019-2026. The article is based on the qualitative study conducted in the greater Jakarta and west Java region during 2023 and 2025, involving in-depth interviews with 20 people convicted of terrorism in Indonesia, released from imprisonment. The interviews allow a situated insight into the perspectives and perceptions of the individuals formerly involved in violent activities; the processes of recruitment and pathways of disengagement, and the potentials for prevention.

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents a comprehensive review of the literature on recruitment and disengagement processes in Indonesia. The second section draws on the

experiences of people that have been recruited by violent networks, with focus on social media and peer contagion, the processes of disengagement. Finally, the fourth section offers conclusion and suggests areas of further research and avenues for future prevention efforts.

The Trait of Extremism in Indonesia

Youth recruitment for violent activities is a serious concern in Indonesia. Since 2009, dozens of young individuals have carried out acts of terrorism. For examples, Nana Ikhwan Maulana (28 years) and Dani Dwi Permana (18 years) conducted a suicide bomb attack at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on July 17, 2009, resulting in nine deaths and over 50 injured. Sultan Azianzah (22 years) attacked three police officers with a machete and two explosives at the Cikokol traffic post in 2016. Rabbial Muslim Nasution (24 years) suicide bombed the Medan Police Headquarters on September 13, 2019. Tendi (23 years) stabbed a person, in the yard of the Intel Brimob Kelapa Dua, Depok, in May 2018. Lukman (26 years) suicide bombed the Makassar Cathedral Church in March 2021. Zakiah Aini (25 years) attacked the National Police Headquarters on Wednesday, March 31, 2021. The Surabaya church bombings on May 13, 2018, targeted three churches and resulted in the deaths of 13 people, were executed by a family of six, including parents and their four minor children. The father, Dita Oepriarto, drove a car bomb into the Surabaya Centre Pentecostal Church. His wife, Puji Kuswati, and their daughters aged 12 and 9 attacked the Diponegoro Indonesian Christian Chuch. The sons aged 18 and 15, targeted the Santa Maria Catholic Church.

However, since the bombing of a police station in West Java in December 2022, Indonesia has not experienced any major terrorist attacks. This does not indicate that terrorist networks have been dismantled. Although, no official exact numbers exists, from 2020 to March 2022, 658 people were arrested as members of terrorist groups in Indonesia[2], and in 2023, authorities arrested 148 members of terrorist groups, most of whom were affiliated with Jamaah Ansharut Daulah

[2] Francisca Christy Rosana, "Deretan Anak Muda di Bawah Usia 30 Tahun yang Menjadi Pelaku Terorisme," Tempo.co., accessed 10 November 2025, https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1448400/deretan-anak-muda-di-bawah-usia-30-tahun-yang-menjadi-pelaku-terorisme.

(JAD).[3] Today, the primary security threat is digital according to the National Counterterrorism Agency and Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs that throughout 2024 blocked 180,954 pieces of content containing 'intolerance, radicalism, extremism and terrorism'.[4] The Indonesian National Police with primary investigative responsibility assigned to the special counterterrorism unit "Densus 88, have integrated digital counter-narratives and surveillance into their strategies and activities.[5]

This is seen on the backdrop of internet usage among younger generations (ages 12–27) is notably high in Indonesia with 87% of people in this age group accessing the internet.[6] A recent survey shows that there are 143 million social media users registered in Indonesia in 2025, and it is estimated that 17 million users are under 18 years old.[7] The rise of internet access and social media has provided criminal networks with a broader reach, enabling them to connect with younger and at-risk individuals. In 2018, the State Intelligence Agency revealed that 39% of students were exposed to content with the intention to commit acts of terrorism[8], and that 80% of young individuals are exposed to political extreme content online.[9] Furthermore, data from the National

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[3] US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Indonesia," accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/country -reports-on-terrorism-2023/indonesia/.

[4] Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, "180 Ribu Konten Bermuatan Terorisme," accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.bnpt.go.id/ bnpt-180-ribu-konten-bermuatan-terorisme-diblokir-sepanjang-2024.

[5] Ali Masyhar et al., "Legal Challenges of Combating International Cyberterrorism: The NCB Interpol Indonesia and Global Cooperation," *Legality: Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum* 31, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.22219/ljih.v31i2.29668.

[6] Reuters, "Indonesia plans minimum age for social media use," accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-planning- minimum-age-limit-social-media-users-minister-says-2025-01-14/.

[7] Datareportal, "Digital 2025 Indonesia," accessed 10 November 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-indonesia.

[8] Abraham Utama, "Badan intelijen menemukan '39% mahasiswa di Indonesia radikal', apa tindak lanjutnya?," accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-43949279.

[9] Widiatmaka, Pipit. (2023), "Implikasi keterlibatan pemuda dalam tindakan terorisme terhadap ketahanan nasional di Indonesia," *Humanika*. 23. 155–166. DOI: 10.21831/hum.v23i2.58590

Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) in 2017, showed that 11.8% of terrorist perpetrators were under 21 years old and 47,3% between 21 and 30 years old. Indicating the vulnerabilities of young individuals and underscores the need to understand how online use shape processes of radicalization, in order to develop preventive measures.

Although, engagement is a product of multiple factors, a key feature is the dissemination of biased messaging and a propagandistic interpretation of religious values and texts.[10] For example, violent videos of 'heroic' activities that promote and idealise certain religious interpretations and encourages.[11] These materials works as a 'contagion' effect, shaping attitudes of those who seek for such content (active investigators) and those who are exposed through algorithms or peers (passive receivers).[12] This distribution of biased messaging amplifies extremist narratives, making it easier for criminal organizations to reach susceptible youth and idealise violence.

It generates a sense of social recognition and validation, giving young people the impression that violent acts are widely accepted and admired within their social circles which reinforces extremists' narratives and violent potentialities. Actions that are seen as righteous, rightful and sacrificial, and to be rewarded in the afterlife. This promotion and attraction of piety and politics, utilises a lack of religious knowledge, political acumen and societal experience of the young people to critically digest the information and instils a biased and wrongful religious interpretation that promote engagement and legitimise violence.

Contagion: what it is and how we work with it

According to the American Psychology Association (APA) Dictionary of Psychology, "social contagion" is defined as "the spread of behaviors, attitudes, and emotions among individuals within a crowd or

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[10] Teguh Firmansyah, "Kepala BNPT Ungkap Tiga Motif Tindakan Terorisme," Republika.co.id, accessed 10 November 2025, https://news.republika.co.id/berita/qzhjl1377/kepala-bnpt-ungkap-tiga-motif-tindakan-terorisme.

[11] Andita Rahma, "Pengamat Jelaskan Anak Muda Bisa Terjerat Jaringan Terorisme," accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.tempo.co/hukum/ pengamat-jelaskan-anak-muda-bisa-terjerat-jaringan-terorisme--525554.

[12] *Ibid.*

other social group." When studying the role of digital spaces and social networks in the diffusion and amplification of certain behaviours, we utilise the concept of peer contagion. It is an explanatory lens to understand the ways criminal networks messaging and propaganda influence young people through social media and close social bonds; how social contagion is dependent on explicit social feedback and the user-interface of the social media.

Peer contagion describes a mutual influence process that occurs between an individual and a peer. It includes behaviours and emotions that potentially undermine one's own sociability or cause harm to others, including aggression, bullying, weapon carrying, drug use, or depression.[13] Within the peer contagion approach, the concept of confluence describes how adolescents and young people antisocial behaviours evolves in the context of their friendships and shaped by (a) experiences of peer rejection, (b) initial selection of friends, and (c) peer influence among friends through peer reinforcement processes, also referred to as deviancy training.[14] Understanding how peers shape problem behaviours requires looking at them as sources of influence and accounting for how young people come to have particular friends.[15]

We recognise that social proximity amplifies the contagion of anti-social behaviours more strongly than the contagion of pro-social behaviours. Young individuals who already engage in antisocial or violent behaviour are particularly susceptible to behavioural contagion with peers whom they share close social bonds. In other words, individuals that are in vulnerable situations are particularly at risk of negative peer influence. This susceptibility is reflected both in frequency (prevalence

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[13] Dishion TJ, Tipsord JM, "Peer Contagion in Child and Adolescent Social and Emotional Development," *Annu Rev Psychol* (2011) 62:189-214. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100412.

[14] Dishion TJ, Patterson GR, dan Griesler PC (1994) "Peer adaptations in the development of antisocial behavior In Huesmann LR (Ed.)," *Aggressive behavior. The Plenum Series in Social/Clinical Psychology.* Boston, MA: Springer; DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4757-9116-7_4.

[15] Kornienko O, Ha T, Dishion TJ, "Dynamic pathways between rejection and antisocial behavior in peer networks: Update and test of confluence model," *Dev Psychopathol*, (2020) 32(1):175-188. DOI: 10.1017/S0954579418001645.

of contagion) and magnitude (extent of contagion).[16] Dimant, shows how behaviors (pro- and anti-social) are dramatically shaped by perceived proximity and imitation, giving social context a central role in predicting who becomes radicalized and who resists. Importantly, these patterns of contagion are not limited to direct interactions; they can occur indirectly, through observation of peers' actions, narrations, or online content and messaging, creating a broader network effect.

Thus, peer contagion in this study of recruitment and disengagement, refers to a reciprocal influence process between individuals and their peers, where interactions transmit attitudes, emotions, and behaviours that can either foster political extreme commitment or, conversely, support disengagement. Although, this dynamic often operates below the level of conscious intent; participants might not set out to radicalise their peers for a specific purpose, this is nonetheless underscored by the networks intentional radical messaging and propaganda. While the youth engage in everyday relational exchanges - storytelling, joking, group rituals, or shared grievances - that meet immediate social needs for belonging, status, or validation, it also inadvertently and intrinsically reinforces extremist worldviews or legitimise harmful actions, that can lead to violent acts.

In social contagion theory, the adaptation of new behaviours or perceptions depends on exposure. This means that social peer influence can shape people's responses and this intersects with the structure of their social network. Granovetter's in 1978 introduces threshold models of diffusion and collective behaviours to explain how individual decisions to participate in collective behaviours depend on the number of others already participating.[17] This theoretical perspective help us understand how exposure and social thresholds operate in real-world settings, where the structure of peer networks and repeated daily interactions can facilitate the spread of perceptions and behavioural approval. For example, studies of Indonesian extremist networks show that natural settings - such as informal religious study circles (pengajian), youth

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[16] Dimant E (2019). "Contagion of pro- and anti-social behavior among peers and the role of social proximity," *Journal of Economic Psychology,* ISSN: 01674870, Volume: 73, Pages: 66 - 88, DOI: 10.1016/j.joep.

[17] Granovetter, M. (1978). Threshold models of collective behavior. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(6), 1420–1443. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1086/226707.

hangouts, or online chat groups - are fertile grounds for such contagion processes.[18] In these spaces, ideological narratives and behavioural norms are absorbed through repeated exposure and peer approval. Recruitment often relies on affective bonds within tight-knit friendship or kinship groups, where ideological reinforcement occurs as part of ordinary socialising rather than formal indoctrination, yet is built on and reinforced by sharing of propaganda content and biased messaging, often online.

One well-documented mechanism within peer contagion is "ideological deviancy training", a process similar to the deviancy training observed in criminology but focused on extremist ideas and actions. It involves give-and-take conversations in which peers affirm each other's radicalised viewpoints, recount past acts of defiance or militancy, speculate about possible future operations. These interactions receive social rewards -such as laughter, praise, or respect - for expressing extremist sentiments, which not only validate deviant talk, but also strengthens group cohesion and reinforces commitment to the cause. What makes ideological deviancy training particularly potent is that it is embedded within ordinary social exchanges, such as joking, storytelling, rituals, or repeated group interactions.

Such influence processes can be amplified or attenuated by the structure of the network and the medium of interaction. For example, closed WhatsApp groups or encrypted Telegram channels can intensify ideological bonding by insulating members from alternative narratives, while in-person friendship groups within youth organisations may either entrench extremist leanings or become focal points for countering external influence, where the same intimacy can be harnessed for de-radicalisation processes.

We argue that utilising the concept of peer contagion underscores that radicalisation is not purely an individual cognitive shift but a socially embedded learning process, operating through subtle exchanges that

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[18] Nuraniyah, N. (2019). The evolution of online violent extremism in Indonesia and the Philippines. (Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology; No. 5). The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/evolution-online-violent-extremism-indonesia-and-philippines.

meet basic human needs for affirmation and belonging - needs that extremist networks are adept at fulfilling.

Importantly is the role of social learning, identification with significant others, and the normalization of specific norms in this complex process. This perspective enhances our understanding of pathways in and out of engagement by illuminating the transfer of biased perceptions, sentiments and values, through peers and social media, forming a complex non-linear interaction between individual, relational and social factors. This is crucial if this perspective is to be used not only to investigate negative outcomes, but also as a framework for promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviours'. By applying this lens, preventive interventions can become more effective and disengagement programs can disrupt harmful contagion by altering group norms, diversifying peer environments, and fostering pro-social identities. Moreover, it can inform prevention and disengagement policies and initiatives.[19]

A. Pathways In and Out of Violent Extremism: An In-Depth Review

Over two decades, the Indonesian experience has yielded a uniquely rich scholarly field interrogating the causes, processes, and outcomes of violent extremism, recruitment and disengagement. Drawing on key theoretical and empirical sources, it documents an evolving set of drivers, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with radicalization and disengagement processes. The studies collectively highlight the multidimensional interplay between personal motivations, social networks, digital transformations, and the broader governance and community context in shaping extremist trajectories. Special emphasis is placed on peer and social network influences, digital transformation, and gendered dynamics with special attention to agentic variation and context adaptation. By foregrounding analytical nuance and evidence, the review examines different pathways in and out of extremist groups.

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[19] Hallsworth, et al., (2017), "The behavioralist as tax collector: Using natural field experiments to enhance tax compliance," *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 148, Pages 14-31. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2017.02.003.

The literature approaches violent extremism from a range of different thematics, from individual situations and emotions, to structural conditions of politics and economy.

In the following, we focus on why people join and leave the organizations as identified in the literature, yet, starting with an overview of studies of interventions. Collectively the literature testify to the complexity of violent extremism and the individuality of recruitment processes that underscore the need for contextual analytical perspectives, in the continuum between the generalisable and the specific, rather than applying a fixed approach.

Interventions aimed at prevention

Disengagement efforts take many forms and operate at different levels but works on the assumption that individual reversals can be stimulated and motivated.

Research conducted by Sirait et al.[20], Sipayung et al.[21], and Sumpter and Wardhani[22] on reintegration attempts argues for a "whole-of-society" approach that involves collaboration among the state, the community, and civil society. While gaps in coordination, the availability of safe spaces, and bureaucratic silos persist, these studies demonstrate effectiveness when stakeholders maintain dialogue and pursue evidence-driven innovation.

From a legal and rights-based perspective, Ilyas and Athwal[23], as well as Usman et al. [24], critically reflect on the legal, ethical, and rights-

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[20] Sirait, O., Syauqillah, M., & Hanita, M. (2021). Deradicalization program in Indonesia. *Journal of Terrorism Studies,* 3(2). DOI: https://doi.org/10.7454/jts.v3i2.1040.

[21] Sipayung, A., Sumartono, S., Soleh, C., Rochmah, S., & Rozikin, M. (2023). "Dynamics Implementation of De-Radicalism Policy to Prevent Terrorism in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Dynamics-Implementation- of-De-Radicalism-Policy-to-Sipayung-Soleh/25ab93e08d0ca6a3.

[22] Sumpter, Cameron, and Yuslikha K. Wardhani. (2022). "Hopes and Hurdles for Indonesia's National Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism," RESOLVE Network. DOI: https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2022.2.sea.

[23] Ilyas M, Athwal R. (2021). De-Radicalisation and Humanitarianism in Indonesia. *Social Sciences* 10(3):87. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10030087.

[24] Usman, U., Hafrida, H., Rapik, M., Maryati, M., & Sabri, A. Z. S. A. (2023), "Radicalism in Indonesia: Modelling and Legal Construction," *Journal of*

based aspects of reintegration, emphasizing that adherence to the rule of law and protection from excessive coercion are essential not only to legitimacy but also to actual outcomes. In a related institutional analysis, Bafadhal et al.[25] and Mohammed[26] highlight persistent institutional inertia, identifying gaps where well-intentioned policies falter due to entrenched organizational cultures and inadequate monitoring.

In reviewing Indonesia's evolving deradicalization interventions, Widya[27] highlights that flexible and individualized approaches combining psychological, social, and vocational support—particularly those that creatively foster trust, facilitate family reconciliation, and promote positive identity formation—are more promising than formulaic or punitive forms of "deprogramming."

Along same lines, Muhammad & Hiariej[28], Bafadhal et al., and Hikam & Munabari[29], notes that misaligned incentives and overly punitive "hard" security interventions may inadvertently reinforce grievance frames and hamper legitimate disengagement.

Indonesian Legal Studies, 8(2), 755-802. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15294/jils.v8i2.71520.

[25] Bafadhal, O. M., Santoso, A. D. and Murti, K. (2022). "When radicalisation meets bureaucracy: Fluid radicalisation and its consequences on policy alternatives in Indonesian de-radicalisation Policies," *Public Administration Issues*, 5 (Special Issue II, electronic edition), pp. 65–86. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17323/1999-5431-2022-0-5-65-86.

[26] Mohammed, I. (2020). "Critical Reflections on De-Radicalisation in Indonesia," *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 10(1), 43-57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26618/ojip.v10i1.3097.

[27] Widya, B. (2020). "Deradicalization in Indonesia: Implementation and challenge," *Journal of Terrorism Studies*, 2(1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.7454/jts.v2i1.1016.

[28] Muhammad, A., & Hiariej, E. (2021), "Deradicalization program in Indonesia radicalizing the radicals," *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1905219.

[29] Hikam, M. A., & Munabari, M. (2020). Unholy War: Violent Extremism in Marawi and Its Spillover to Indonesia. *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*. https://msupress.org/journals/journal-for-the-study-of-radicalism/.

Sustainable disengagement, as emphasized by Agastia et al. [30], Goodhardt et al. [31], and Saryam and Ragamustari[32], requires that intervention programs be flexible, gender-sensitive, community-embedded, locally grounded, and rooted in participatory local leadership, rather than in technocratic or centralized "best practice" importation. In these efforts, gender-sensitive programming is essential.

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), as highlighted by Wildan and Muttaqin[33] and also by Wildan[34], can serve as potential loci of identity reconstruction and positive peer mentorship. Moderate curricula, alum mentorship, and daily socialization are shown to foster alternative Islamic identities rooted in pluralism. However, organizational resistance and the challenge of sustaining change amid broader cultural currents are also noted. Furthermore, research evaluating the effectiveness of moderate religious organizations shows that when these entities authentically connect with youth and marginalized groups, they can "vaccinate" communities against radical pitches, while warning that instrumentalization by state actors often leads to backlash or cynicism.

Reintegration into a supportive family and community environment may be as crucial as counselling or job skills, as argued by Mubaraq et al.. At the same time, social rejection or marginalization

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30 Agastia, I. G. B. D., Perwita, A. A. B., & Subedi, D. B. (2020). Countering violent extremism through state-society partnerships: a case study of de-radicalisation programmes in Indonesia. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 15(1), 23–43. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1722317.

31 Goodhardt et al., (1984), "The Dirichlet: A comprehensive model of buying behaviour," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 147 (5) (1984), pp. 621-643

32 Saryam, R., & Ragamustari, N. (2021). "The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia," *Journal of Deradicalization*. DOI: https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/index.

33 Wildan, M., & Muttaqin, A. (2022), "Mainstreaming Moderation in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Pesantrens in Central Java," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Mainstreaming-Moderation-in-Preventing/25ab93e08d0ca6a3.

34 Wildan, M. (2022), "Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia: The Role of Former Terrorists and Civil Society Organisations," DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2032-4_9.

increases the risk of recidivism, and culturally resonant embrace or acceptance (through weddings, religious meetings) predicts progress.[35]

In the above, disengagement appears at the same time as an individual transformation of values, cognition and identity, and an instrument for intervention by external actors and institutions – state and non- state, nonetheless influenced by community and family dynamics. We will now turn to why people join violent extreme organisations

B. Joining or Engaging in Violent Extremism

1. Social Identity and Societal Conditions: Grievances and Validation

Existential anxiety - a sense of meaninglessness and insecurity- directly predicts higher endorsement of violent extremism in Indonesian youth, especially when paired with low political efficacy and outward-focused (extrinsic) religiosity, as shown by Iqbal et al[36]. This is not merely a question of "poor mental health"; it reflects an interplay between psychological state and the individual's perceived sense of control of their environment. Iqbal's works rigorously detail how the search for order, certainty, and social status renders some youth susceptible to ideological appeals aimed at restoring "dignity."

In Kruglanski's "significance quest" theory, radicalization is theorized as a motivated quest for personal and collective worth in the face of humiliation, blocked ambition, or existential failures. Entry into violent groups is less about fanaticism than about attaining meaning and validation.[37] Violent groups offer not only community but status and

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[35] Mubaraq, Z., Arifin, S., Abdullah, I., Jubba, H., & Indiyanto, A. (2022). "Return of the lost son: Disengagement and social reintegration of former terrorists in Indonesia." *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 2135235. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2135235.

[36] Iqbal, M., O'Brien, K. S., & Bliuc, A. M. (2022). "The Relationship between Existential Anxiety, Political Efficacy, Extrinsic Religiosity and Support for Violent Extremism in Indonesia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2034221.

[37] Kruglanski, A. (2013). "Psychological Insights into Indonesian Islamic Terrorism: The What, the How and the Why of Violent Extremism," *Journal of Political Psychology*.

purpose, especially among marginalized, dislocated, or identity-threatened youth.

Former terrorist convicts, as examined by Wahab et al., are shown to be influenced by emotional hooks - "salvation," "martyrdom," online glorification of jihad - which are especially persuasive among young men and women navigating spiritual uncertainty or identity crisis. Their study uniquely situates recruitment as a subjective negotiation, shaped by both digital content and the experiential reality of marginalization.[38]

This "grievance amplification," Fitriani et al. bolster, such as economic marginalization - lack of jobs, poor schools, government neglect - to shape the attraction of engagement. They connect local resource loss, unemployment, and perceived injustice with the receptiveness to both international and homegrown extremist appeals as locally specific risk ecologies.[39] Their findings emphasize that perceptions of unfairness and blocked social mobility - often compared with other communities - fuel group-level grievance and mobilization.

Through interviews with returning foreign fighters and former prisoners, Syafiq deepens the analysis, highlighting how identity threats, social alienation, and the lack of a positive "post-extremist" identity make disengagement precarious. The analysis reveals the double vulnerability experienced by returnees, who are stigmatized by mainstream society yet simultaneously distrusted by their former comrades.[40]

Recruitment is less about cold organizational offers and more about the warmth, trust, and solidarity fostered in small groups - friends, religious circles, even soccer clubs, as shown by Chernov Hwang and

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[38] Abdul Jamil Wahab, Azwar Aswin, Fakhruddin M., Siti Atieqoh (2024). Deradicalization Programs in Indonesia: Perspectives of Former Terrorist Convicts, Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies (QIJIS) Volume 12, Number 1, 2024 (PP : 75-118). DOI: https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i1.22931.

[39] Fitriani, Alif Satria, Pricilia Putri Nirmalasari, and Rebekha Adriana (2018). "The Current State of Terrorism in Indonesia: Vulnerable Groups, Networks, and Responses," *CSIS WORKING PAPER SERIES WPSPOL*.

[40] Syafiq, M. (2019). "Deradicalisation and disengagement from terrorism and threat to identity: An analysis of former jihadist prisoners' accounts." *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 31(2), hlm. 227–251. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333619863169.

Hwang & Schulze[41]. Their work finds that charismatic peers and mentor-like figures serve as catalysts for exposure to radical doctrine, often based in gendered narratives.

On a similar note, Johnston et al.[42], Macfarlane[43], and Jacqui True & Sri Eddyono[44] analyze how gendered messaging frames men as heroic actors and women as "moral guardians" or future mothers of fighters but also show that women both resist and shape radical discourses. Showing how gender constructs are used in online messaging to target vulnerable young men through appeals to masculinity and religious duty by portraying participation in extremist activities as a rite of passage into manhood. Noor (2024) widen this by mapping women's roles as recruiters, supporters, and - in some contexts - key change agents in countering violent extremism.[45] They suggest that social gender roles are a key aspect of identity formation of violent receptance and alignment. The under-theorized yet empirically significant role of women as disengagement enablers and boundary-spanners emerges as a critical knowledge frontier.

2. Digital era: Inclusion and Purpose

Hence, identity threats, existential anxiety, and emotional appeals appears as key to understand violent engagement in which digital media play a key role to shape individuals' pathways into violent extremism.

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[41] Hwang, J. C., & Schulze, K. E. (2018). "Why They Join: Pathways into Indonesian Jihadist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 30(6), 911–932. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1481309.

[42] Johnston, M. F., Iqbal, M., & True, J. (2020). "The Lure of (Violent) Extremism: Gender Constructs in Online Recruitment and Messaging in Indonesia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(4), 470–488. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759267.

[43] Macfarlane, K. (2024). "Indonesian Women and Terrorism: An Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Trends," *Politics and Governance*, 12. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7724.

[44] Jacqui True and Sri Eddyono (2021). "Preventing Violent Extremism – What Has Gender Got to Do With It?" European Psychologist 2021 26:1, 55-67, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000434.

[45] Noor, H. (2024). "From Villain to Hero: The Role of Disengaged Terrorists in Social Reintegration Initiatives," *Politics and Governance,* 12, Article 7838. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7838.

The peer contagion perspective is powerfully extended by studies exploring digital spaces.

Digital media accelerates the process by providing immediate access to supportive networks of radicalized peers that emphasize in-group dynamics of acceptance, as noted by Muluk et al[46]. How organizations deliberately exploit "niche" digital spaces and ephemeral social media content to evade surveillance, reach new audiences, and push narratives with maximum emotional resonance - particularly to the lonely, alienated, or aggrieved- is revealed by Allais and Chalmers. Matin et al. explore how ideologically sophisticated recruitment organizations manipulate religious narratives and scriptural ignorance.[47]

How extremist groups use emotional and identity-based appeals to attract those who feel marginalized by mainstream society is shown by Nuraniyah[48]. It traces how encrypted apps, Facebook groups, and WhatsApp circles create new "dens" of radical reinforcement and demonstrates that digital context enables new forms of recruitment, intensifying network effects - mimicry, confirmation, mutual validation. Extremist groups tap into the emotional vulnerabilities of their target audience through high-quality, professionally produced videos that glorify jihad and martyrdom, boosting local grievances by Islamophobic narratives and the global "jihadosphere."[49]

However, this is not a straightforward contingent process of engagement. Suyanto introduce "pseudo-radicalism," finding that university-educated urban youth "play" with radical symbols and language online - a marker of identity, a search for belonging - often

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[46] Muluk, H., Umam, A. N., & Milla, M. N. (2019). "Insights from a deradicalization program in Indonesian prisons: The potential benefits of psychological intervention prior to ideological discussion," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 23(1), 42–53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12392.

[47] Matin, A., Fuad, N. R., & Zein, M. (2020). "Genealogy of Religious Thought and Activities of Ex-Terrorist Prisoners in Surakarta," *Dinika: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*.

[48] Nuraniyah, N. (2019). "The evolution of online...."

[49] Akram, M., & Nasar, A. (2023). "A Bibliometric Analysis of Radicalization through Social Media," *Ege Academic Review*.

lacking any deep doctrinal commitment.[50] This presents a fundamental conundrum: how to distinguish performative extremism (influenced by online subcultures) from steadily deepening ideological engagement. Especially since ideologically sophisticated recruitment organizations actively manipulate religious narratives and scriptural ignorance.[51] And recognising that doctrinal and organizational rivalries (Salafi vs. traditionalist, urban vs. rural) can be sources of resilience and new vulnerabilities to strategic infiltration by recruiters capitalizing on division and religious cleavages.[52]

C. Leaving or Disengagement from Violent Extremism

1. Identity, Emotion and Cognition

Empirical research demonstrates that disengagement from violent extremism is rarely a momentary or purely cognitive event; it is a gradual, socially embedded process shaped by psychological, emotional and identity-related factors.

Chernov Hwang examining disengagement's internal mechanism, found that the "motivational break" often emerges from everyday disillusionment—such as hypocrisy among leaders, broken promises, or encounters with civilians' suffering—rather than dramatic epiphany. Psychosocial distress, emotional exhaustion, and trauma from both perpetration and exposure further reinforces the exit process.[53]

To understand these processes, Rahmanto & Golose introduced the concept of "de-recidivism," arguing that helping people avoid sliding

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[50] Suyanto, B., Sirry, M., & Sugihartati, R. (2022). "Pseudo-radicalism and the deradicalization of educated youth in Indonesia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 45(2), 153–172. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1654726.

[51] Matin, Abdul, Nur Rohman and Fuad Muhammad Zein. (2023). "Geneology of Religious Thought and Activities of Ex-Terrorist Prisoners in Surakarta." *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*.

[52] Kato, H. (2021). "Exploring the Reality and Aspirations of Muslims: The divisions of the Umat in Indonesia," *ISLAM NUSANTARA:Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 2(1), 1–20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v2i1.102.

[53] Chernov Hwang, J. (2015). "The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists: Understanding the Pathways," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(2), 277–295. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1034855.

back to violence - may sometimes be more practical and measurable than full cognitive deradicalization. Their data, tracking post-prisoners, demonstrate that practical reintegration such as securing employment and strengthening positive social ties contributes to deeper cognitive and ideological change.[54]

The subtle interplay between cognitive and behavioural transformation, emphasizing the social capital, mentoring, and peer influence wielded by those who "successfully exit," is further described by Brailey et al[55]. Chalmers supports the evidence that even high-risk returnees can become "ambassadors of disengagement" with comprehensive aftercare. Ethical and practical risks of positioning ex-offenders as role models are warned by Noor, arguing the need for strict vetting and professional support. The spectrum of post-release paths, total disengagement, partial disengagement (where ideological commitment fades but social ties linger), and recidivism, needs to be addressed, as suggested by Matin, rather than a binary of engaged or disengaged. [56]

2. Digital Frontiers

Rapid digitalization in Indonesia introduces both opportunities and challenges for disengagement, with the "digital aftercare" challenge highlighted by Syamsurrijal et al., Suhadi & Sandyarani, Nuraniyah, and Suyanto et al., who show that prevention and post-release success require digital literacy, online mentoring, and counter-narrative content. Firmansyah and Allais emphasize the need for continuous assessment and "learning while doing," keeping pace with non-state groups, shifts in

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[54] Rahmanto, D. N., & Golose, P. R. (2022). De-recidivism, not de-radicalisation: Understanding the cognitive process among de-radicalised Indonesian terrorist returnees. Cogent Social Sciences, 8(1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2051817.

[55] Brailey, M., Ismail, N. H., & Amir, I. (2023). "Hearts, Hands, and Heads": Exploring the Relationship Between Disengagement and De-radicalization Through Counter Violent Extremism Project Implementation in Indonesia. Muslim Politics Review. Vol. 2 No. 1, June 2023, Hlm. 2-20.

[56] Matin, Abdul, Nur Rohman and Fuad Muhammad Zein. (2023). "Geneology of Religious...."

community attitudes, and the ever-changing terrain of social media and digital life.

D. What We Know So Far

The review highlights the complexity of engagement and disengagement processes. Shaped in a dynamic interplay of micro-level emotions of identity and ideological motivations, and macro-level conditions, like political exclusion, economic marginalization, and in-group religious grievances. It reflects the complexities of contextual, situational and personal causes of joining and leaving extreme violent organisations, in which social norms, peers and digital networks and community further shapes these dynamics and can either act as protective factors or as facilitators of extremist ideologies. Where online repeated exposure and social reinforcement can amplify extremism and shape radicalization pathways through peer identity acceptance and validation in restricted social media spaces.

It shows that effective interventions integrate psychological support, social and vocational programs, digital literacy, and gender-sensitive approaches, embedded within family, peers and community networks, facilitating exit from extremist groups, with a focus on behavioural disengagement rather than deradicalization. In addition, building on peer contagion theory, interventions should not only target individual attitudes but actively reshape group norms and peer reinforcement processes—by diversifying peer environments, promoting pro-social identities, and leveraging positive peer influence to counter extremist narratives. They focus less on forcing immediate ideological change and more on facilitating cognitive and behavioural change. It prioritizes eliminating stigma, fostering social acceptance and long-term opportunities to rebuild healthy social networks outside of extremist circles, to regain a positive identity and belonging is crucial for long-term success. Access to livelihood, work and economic safety appears as crucial factors for success.

Our conclusions are summarised in the text and table 1 below:

TABLE 1. Overview of Approaches and Their Key Features and Actions

Approach	Key Features and Actions
Individualised Support	Trauma counselling, identity reconstruction, tailored aftercare
Family & Community	Social acceptance and ties, family reunification, identity reconstruction
Civil Society & Multi-actor	Partnerships, peer mentoring, grassroots and NGO involvement
Holistic Rehabilitation	Education, practical support/vocational training religious re-engagement, social cohesion
Digital Literacy	Online counter-narratives, social media engagement, digital resilience
Gender Sensitivity	Inclusion of women, challenge gendered recruitment, empower diverse roles
Flexible Policy	Continuous evaluation, management agility, local contextualization

In the following section, we analyse the narratives of engagement and disengagement to further understand the shaping of extremist trajectories and provide an analysis of individual pathways in and out of violent political extreme organisations.

Ethical approval is granted (ethical clearance number: 165/FPsi.Komite Etik/PDP.04.00/2022). We interviewed 20 former convicted terrorists in the greater Jakarta and west Java region Nineteen male, and one female, aged 17 and 35 years old. Their prison sentences varied depending on their convictions for terrorist activities since the 2010s. The shortest sentence was two years for acting as a sympathizer in an Islamic radical-extremist group in North Jakarta. The longest sentence was 11 years in prison for possession of explosives and planning an attack on a police station. All were affiliated with Islamic State of Iraq and Syiria (ISIS), Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). All had joined during adolescence or early adulthood.

Interviews were conducted between early 2023 and late 2024. The participants represent a hard-to-reach community, often characterized

by suspicion, distrust and social stigma. Some participants had recently been released from prison and needed time to readjust to society. To facilitate participation, a snowball or peer referral sampling technique was used. Building rapport with the initial participants, ensuring the confidentiality of their personal data, and guaranteeing that information would solely be used for research purposes, helped us to reach further participants through initial participant vouching for us and their introduction of the peers to share their experiences. Participants signed an informed consent form to participate and have their interviews recorded. All interviews were transcribed in Bahasa and English. Strict measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and compliance with data protection regulation in Indonesia and Denmark.

The research used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore individuals' subjective experiences, as outlined by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin and Biggerstaff & Thompson, enabling an examination of how participants made sense of their engagement and disengagement from violent extremism. This approach allowed the researchers to uncover meaning: what the experiences of engaging with and leaving an extremist group meant to them. It generated knowledge on how emotions, such as fear, hope, or purpose, shaped their fates and their journeys, and helped identify common patterns - even though experiences are personal. It also provided a clear picture of how social relationships and media exposure influenced participants' views and choices. Study participants described varied routes into extremism, but social media use consistently emerged as a common denominator in the engagement and radicalization processes.

Another approach chosen is the study of legislation, in this case, Law No. 5 of 2018 concerning the Amendment to Law No. 15 of 2003 Concerning the Establishment of a Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 1 of 2002 Concerning the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism Becoming Law. This research analyses which legal articles need to be revised and developed to counter the process of radicalization through digital media.[57]

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[57] On the other hand, the illegal channel is known as "fai'," where they justify using methods such as robbery, theft, fraud, and others. Law Number 9 of 2013 on the Eradication and Prevention of Terrorism Financing Crimes serves as the legal basis

E. Narratives of engagement and disengagement

The personal narratives of engagement and disengagement among individuals convicted of terrorism in Indonesia reveal a dynamic interplay between individual perceptions, peer contagion and social learning, and societal conditions. The analysis demonstrates that the journey into - or out of - violent extremism is rarely the result of a single event or ideological conviction but is deeply woven into the fabric of everyday relationships, affective needs, and digital-era modes of belonging. Recognizing the subtleties of these processes is vital for researchers, practitioners and policymakers, as it goes beyond the abstract of emotions and perceptions to touch the contextual realities of those most at risk. This approach foregrounds the interplay of digital and face-to-face peer contagion, "heroic" narrative agency, and social support, pushing the analytical framework beyond more static typologies to address processual, affective, and relational understandings of political extremism. The following analysis unpacks these dynamics, tracing how individuals navigate belonging, belief, and betrayal across their trajectories of engagement and exit.

Social Networks and Perceptions:

"User → distributor → content creator→ action"

Recruitment networks exploit algorithmic visibility to identify young people active in online discussions and monitor their activity in groups and chatrooms. As these individuals engage in content sharing, they become targets for deliberate outreach, blurring the line between friendship and ideological subscription. Secrecy and privileged access within closed circles reinforce loyalty, framing violent acts as proof of belonging and commitment to the group.

The initial stages of engagement frequently emerge not from fervent doctrinal commitment, but in a combination of social proximity to peers already susceptible to extremist messaging and access to and use

for prosecuting terrorism financing activities. Read on Ali Masyhar Mursyid et al., "Terrorism Financing Modus Operandi In Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies* 10, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v10i2.29593.

of digital platforms. As interviewees recounted, recruitment is often subtle: it may begin with a vague interest and curiosity about world developments or religious teachings augmented by an invitation to an innocuous study group, an encounter at a mosque, or a digital introduction to chat groups where ideological grooming is gently layered atop existing social trust.

In these ambiguous spaces, the lines between kinship ties, religious pursuit, and political activism are readily traversed. For many, the appeal doesn't lie in abstract doctrines, but in a combination of emotional grievances and injustices, hopes of the future and the warmth of acceptance, shared purpose, and the promise of dignity within a trusted circle. Peer influence operates more through affective bonds than rational argumentation and facts, providing recognition, status, and a sense of collective purpose denied in everyday life. Over time, continued exposure to emotionally charged narratives - through stories, video propaganda and witness testimonies, or face-to-face discussion - elevates the perceived legitimacy of extremist goals and conduct. Narratives of "oppression," "heroism," and "sacrifice" gain traction not just through didactic instruction, but as living models, validated and embodied by trusted peers and authority figures.[58]

"At that time, I really enjoyed resharing Facebook posts about the teachings of the Prophet's Sirah, on how the Prophet fought against the Quraysh infidels. To me, it was cool, heroic. Maybe because I frequently reshared such posts, the suggestions in my feed started showing more content about the struggles of Islam. And at that time, ISIS was a trending topic." (TH, 24y).

Likewise, above, many respondents characterized digital spaces as both a catalyst and an amplifier of biased content and messaging, in which initial probing or intellectual curiosity quickly transformed into "deep dives" and reiterations within closed circles. Social media, encrypted chat groups, and other content-sharing platforms offer not only access to radicalised ideas, but also provided emotional rewards of likes, validation, and apparent intimacy within online communities.

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[58] Trias Saputra et al., "Application of Restitution for Criminal Acts Victims: Between Rules and Reality," *Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 333–56, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v9i2.50320.

"No", (no-one asked him to spread the videos) it's just my own awareness. After watching a lot of ISIS videos, there was a desire in me to spread it, so that more and more people know that in Syria it is like this, you know, Islam is like this. At that time, I believed that by spreading this information was the same as spreading the truth".(EFN 34yo).

Digital platforms do not just disseminate biased information but also accelerate the spread of deviant behaviour's, intensifying individual ambitions and group status. The digital space allows affected individuals to "try on" extreme identities, engage in risk-free experimentation, and eventually receive encouragement from networked actors. Messaging, thus harnesses both formal propaganda and informal storytelling, blurring the divide between real-world and online lives.

"So, while we were gathering (in a quran study group), we joined a group on social media, right? We kept checking the media, and since it was online, we eventually met up in person and connected with other networks. Then, the networks of fellow ISIS supporters gathered. Eventually, that's how the JAD organization and the teachings of Ustadz Amar came about. Then I joined that group. I became one of their supporters, took the oath, and joined them. Over time, I was elected as the amir". (J 35y).

Likewise, the quote above, the respondents in some way developed an initial interest for extreme political organisations on their own and started out seeking information about the organizations online and through friends. Through search histories and algorithm-driven recommendations, they gained access to deeper networks of sites and accounts, containing restricted and at times hidden and illegal information about the organisation's ideologies and actions. Some also participated in online discussion forums and shared opinions and re-posted online content about religious interpretations of political events, which they perceived as contributing to an imagined fight for the good.

"At the beginning of 2015, the end of 2014 until beginning of 2015, issues about the khilafah, issues about jihad in Syria, about ISIS also were trending. First I learned about it from facebook. At that time I really liked posting on Facebook about these things. Then there was a group that I joined there, and met these three friends. Then we started to create small groups consisting of just the three of us. In that group we have a lot

of deeper discussions. From these discussions, we felt confident in each other, that we had the same views and beliefs." (ADS, 30yo).

Over time, their role often progressed from being a passive consumer of propaganda to being a distributor and content creator within online secretive fora. This active participation transformed them into promoters and messengers of 'facts' that would, in their perception, ensure them a place on the right side of history, and attain respect form within the community. This active contribution fostered a sense of community based on shared secrets and restricted information; only accessible by an inner group of people in-the-know, with privileged insights and status.

"Initially I studied on my own (...) but I was worried about misinterpreting things, so I had to meet directly with people who were more knowledgeable or more senior. From this, we understood more. So from books, social media - there are also people who write books - I even produce content myself. We use that for propaganda. As an amir, I used it to 'brainwash' them, so to speak, to strengthen their faith and understanding so they don't waver. So, whenever they have questions or concerns about something, I explain it to them" (J 35 yo).

The algorithmic functionality of social media did not just amplify biased information but also made the online-active young people visible to the recruiting networks which monitored their use in groups, channels and chatrooms. As a result, while the young people actively took part in more or less open conversations and exchanges on social media, they at the same time became targets for intentional outreach activities of recruiting organisations. At the same time, the secretive structure of the network and the medium of interaction amplified or attenuated the influence processes by insulating members from alternative perspectives, strengthening ideological bonding, and in some cases supporting in-person peer groups that further entrench and advance extremist leanings.

"Social media seems to help us increase information about Islam, about jihad, we get a lot of information from there. But for JAD itself, I initially knew stories about Syria from a playmate, namely Fazri (Abu Zee). He told stories about Syria, about the land of Shams, which made us love Jihad. He said that he felt more peaceful, his life fulfilled. I looked for it myself on social media. From there, my social media account was immediately filled with content about Syria, ISIS. Finally, through social

media, I met people who thought the same way about Islam, and we formed a network that at that time we called an underground movement" (ASH, 32y).

The line between friendships, sustained through recognition, sharing and a sense of sameness, and the expectations of subscription to extreme ideology and activism became blurred. The search for self-value and curiosity and extensive social media usage created an ideal environment for exposure and acceptance of radical messaging. Whether working alone or with peers, these online activities created a sense of intimate community which, real or not, on one hand gave them purpose in life, and on the other hand provided them with social rewards—such as praise or respect—for expressing extremist sentiments.

"I am affiliated with ISIS. I'm amazed by the struggle of the mujahidin to defend Islam. I was finally able to join ISIS because on one of the pages there was a call like this, 'We must pledge bai'at to khilafah, because if we don't, we will die in a state of jahiliyah' Those words then moved my heart to join in and bai'at to ISIS. I believed it at that time. That's why I finally wanted to join ISIS. I feel that my life is not perfect, as a Muslim I have many sins, I feel that I have many deficiencies, I think that I would not die in a state of jahiliyah. I'd better change. I participated in the struggle of the mujahidin, to realize the khilafah in this world" (ANS 33yo).

These positive emotional feedbacks not only validated deviant talk but also reinforced group identity and commitment to the cause. Secrecy, privilege and intimacy worked in tandem as motivators for further engagement in political extreme ideologies and acceptance of violent actions. The digital media use fostered a sense of community among young people, particularly those grappling with issues of identity, belonging or disillusionment, by offering them in-group validation and exposure to increasingly extreme content, underlined by algorithmic recommendations. Acts of violence were framed not only as political statements of sacrifice or heroism but also as a proof of commitment and inclusion within the group.

Peer contagion is particularly pronounced in these virtual settings: repeated reinforcement (through stories, shared grievances, and digital banter) cements extreme political worldviews via feedback loops. This was a key feature across all the interviews. Antagonistic messaging,

further promotes the perception amongst young people that committing violence will be glorified as heroic acts, offered forgiveness at the gates of heaven as part of an ideological plan for the future of the establishment of a religious based society.

1. Turning Points, Cognitive Dissonance, and Agency in Disengagement

The transition from engagement to disengagement rarely follows a linear or predictable course. Instead, it is marked by gradual erosion in commitment, often triggered by perceived betrayal, internal hypocrisy, organizational failures, or the emotional toll of violence and loss. Many interviewees described a process whereby the "narrative of meaning" that once justified their involvement begins to fray, particularly in the face of disillusionment as cognitive dissonance - a psychological discomfort arising from the clash between experience and belief.[59]

"I feel tired. I'm just tired of seeing everything narrowly, seeing this is wrong, that's wrong, when I see the police oh this is Thaugut, look at the Garuda symbol this is Thaugut, like nothing is right, this has to be fought and that has to be fought. I'm tired sis, I feel like my energy will run out if I continue to be in that mindset and belief" (ANS33y).

"You see. after I reflected a lot, I studied again, especially when I was in prison, I considered that there was group fanaticism (...), they believe, they claim that only their group are good, while the others are considered bathil. (...) Regret is definitely a YES, because I feel like everything is falling apart. My previous life was having a family (wife and daughter), I had a job as a teacher, I no longer have all of that now (ASH33y)."

For some, this is catalysed by increased access to alternative stories in this case from the state intervention in prison by religious scholars and social workers, or just fatigue. Critical to this process is the availability of external anchors - family reintegration, community acceptance, and peer support from those already disengaged - which provide alternative sources of identity and belonging.

"No, (in prison. ed) there is a lack of deradicalization (programmes. ed). But we often discuss with the police, and we often share with friends

[59] Saputra et al.

who want to change. We have had many discussions with the Densus 88, who turned out to be good people. We started to think that our attitude wasn't good (ANS33y)."

As such, the quote confirms the observation that the move toward disengagement is rarely solitary; rather, it is sustained through the negotiation of new relationships that validate the pain of exit and offer new affective and practical horizons.

"Yes, I was deterred (in prison. Ed). When I was detained at Polda, I met Ustadz Ali Imran. Through regular weekly recitations, I understood that the way of jihad that I had been doing was wrong. So after learning Islam through direct teachers, my mind was open. Then I signed the NKRI and then I belonged to the green block, meaning the block that was no longer radical extremist. In my reflections in prison, I questioning what it would be like, if my own family members were bombed. I felt empathy and regret (EFN34y)."

A novel and increasingly significant motif uncovered in participant stories is the idea of "heroic disengagement" - the potential to recast one's exit from extremism not as shameful betrayal but as an act of deeper and truer understanding and transformation, especially of religious scripts, values and perceptions. This often involves taking up new social roles and identity through education or social support, turning hard-won personal experience into counter-narrative opportunities. Participants who successfully claimed this identity transitioned into roles as husbands, father and neighbours, and were able to provide for themselves and their families.

"My hope is that I can start a new chapter in my life, have a permanent job, remarry, and I really want to be able to take my daughter back, because currently I am prohibited from seeing my daughter. I can't contact at all. I wish, I can gather with her again, and enjoy my life like others (ASH33y)."

"I can live my life as well as possible, worship in peace, do a lot of good to other people, and what is certain is that I have my Gojek driver account back, (...) so I can use my account for work (ANS33y)."

Social support plays a pivotal role in enabling these transitions offering validation, vocational pathways, and livelihood, to counter stigma and reduce the risk of recidivism. Nonetheless, these efforts are fragile: persistent suspicion from security services or stigmatised

community members can undermine the possibility of sustained exit and positive role modeling. Thus, effective disengagement is not simply a matter of individual willpower or repentance, but of ongoing, multi-layered psychosocial and economic support.

2. Revising Terrorism Law to Prevent Radicalization

The terrorism law in Indonesia, in effect at the time of this writing, is Law No. 5 of 2018 concerning Amendments to Law Number 15 of 2003 concerning the Establishment of a Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 1 of 2003 Concerning the Eradication of the Criminal Acts of Terrorism into Law.

In general, this terrorism law is much more comprehensive than the previous law, which was enacted somewhat hastily due to the 2002 Bali Bombings and therefore applied retroactively. This law does not apply retroactively, but rather covers all acts related to terrorism, not only post-terrorist arrangements but also activities such as planning, mobilizing, or organizing terrorist acts.

Those who engage in terrorism with individuals within the country and/or abroad or in foreign countries are subject to a minimum prison sentence of 3 (three) years and a maximum of 12 (twelve) years. Expanding the definition of terrorism to include activities prior to an attack is beneficial, as terrorism is often structured and systematic, from planning and organizing to the actual day of the attack. However, precautions must also be taken to prevent law enforcement officials from abusing their power by taking excessive measures without valid evidence in the name of preventing terrorism.[60]

However, this terrorism law needs to be revised and refined to address terrorism prevention through increased digital literacy and responsible oversight of public digital spaces. The proposed changes to

[60] The adoption of the Scientific Crime Investigation (SCI) method provides strong evidentiary value, as it is grounded in rigorous scientific processes, aligned with established theories of legal proof, and integrates identification techniques, digital forensics, forensic psychology, and forensic medicine in a lawful and procedural manner to ensure accuracy and credibility in law enforcement. Read on Kurnia Dewi Anggraeny, Alfan Noufal Rizqullah, and Muhammad Nur, "The Implementation of Scientific Crime Investigation Mechanisms in Police Regional Office Proof Criminal Cases," *Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v9i1.48377.

the articles in Terrorism Law No. 5 of 2018, what was considered after conducting research on former terrorism convicts was Articles 12A, 13A, 43A (3), and 43D (5), as follows (in bold font):

Article 12A

1) *Every Person who with the intention of committing a Crime of Terrorism in the territory of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia or in another country, plans,* ***influences,*** *moves, or organizes a Crime of Terrorism with a person who is in the country and/or abroad or a foreign country shall be sentenced to imprisonment for a minimum of 3 (three) years and a maximum of 12 (twelve) years.*

Article 13A

2) *Any person who has a relationship with a Terrorism organization and deliberately disseminates speech, attitudes, or behaviors, writings,* ***teachings, or ideologies*** *or views with the aim of inciting a person or group of people to commit Violence or Threats of Violence that may result in the Crime of Terrorism shall be punished with imprisonment for a maximum of 5 (five) years*

Article 43 A

3) *Prevention as intended in paragraph (1) implemented through:*
   a. *national preparedness;*
   b. *counter-radicalization; and*
   c. *deradicalization.*
   d. *improving digital literacy*

Article 43D

4) *Deradicalization of individuals or groups of individuals as referred to in paragraph (2) letters e and f can be implemented through:*
   a. *fostering national insight;*
   b. *fostering religious insight; and/or*
   c. *entrepreneurship.*
   d. *monitoring and improving digital literacy.*

Several countries actively monitor digital space and social media to prevent radicalisation, combining legal tools, law-enforcement monitoring, and online counter-narratives.

In United Kingdom, The UK's CONTEST strategy and its Prevent pillar require schools and other public bodies to safeguard people from radicalisation, including through IT policies and web filtering to keep students safe online.[61] The Prevent and Channel programmes support early intervention: authorities can be alerted if online behaviour suggests a risk of radicalisation, triggering multi-agency support rather than purely punitive measures.[62]

In France, after the 2015 attacks, France launched the Stop-Djihadisme online campaign, which includes an official website and online tools to help citizens and practitioners understand, detect, and prevent jihadist radicalization.[63] France works closely with digital platforms and its EU partners to secure rapid removal (within about one hour) of terrorist content online and to curb extremist propaganda and recruitment on social media.[64]

Media-based P/CVE (Preventing/ Countering Violent Extremism) initiatives that include monitoring and counter-narrative campaigns operate in countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and several East African and ASEAN states.[65] International bodies like INTERPOL and many national security agencies monitor publicly available social media to detect radicalization, recruitment, funding, and planning of terrorist activities before violence occurs.[66]

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[61] See: https://childlawadvice.org.uk/information-pages/radicalisation-in-schools-and-the-prevent-duty/ accessed on 18 January 2026.

[62] See: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-if-youre-worried-about-someone-being-radicalised, accessed on 18 January 2026.

[63] See: https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/combatting-radicalisation-france-experimentation-professionalisation, accessed on 18 January 2026.

[64] See: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/terrorism-france-s-international-action/, accessed on 18 January 2026.

[65] Widjanarko, P., Chusjairi, J. A., & Sunaryo. (2025). "Immunizing" communities: Social media and preventing/countering violent extremism initiatives by former terrorists. Frontiers in Communication, 10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1593509

[66] See: https://www.babelstreet.com/blog/social-media-threat-monitoring-improves-national-security

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that engagement and disengagement are less a function of mendable "root causes" or simplistic push-pull formulas than of dynamic, interactive, and contextually contingent processes. There is no single profile or path to recruitment, but rather a combination of personal, social, and ideological, and contextual factors that can lead individuals to accept and join extremist ideologies and organizations, creating complex pathways into and out of violent organizations. They are journeys, constructed through evolving social worlds, affective negotiations, and the continuous search for meaning and dignified identity. Although, every journey is personal and unique the analysis also reveals that there are some commonalties in the engagement processes and the pathways towards acceptance of violence. These are, however, not common identifiable factors but rather sequenced temporal events of cognitive shifts in motivations and, more less conscious, decision-making for further intensive organisational involvement and deeper ideological engagement, leading towards violent outcomes.

These processes of engagement appear to be happening over three stages that denote a transformation of individual identity; from being an investigator of information, then becoming a contributor of content and an active distributor of biased messaging, eventually a final stage of acceptance and readiness to the use of violence. The transformation can be further amplified by peer contagion within online and offline networks, where mutual influence accelerates ideological shifts. This process of change takes place at the intersection of individual emotions and societal conditions, as micro and macro drivers for engagement, starting with an initial decision to learn more about religion and religious based political movements, such as Isis, in combination with political grievances of societal and global injustices and hopes.

The first sequence in the process of change, is motivated by curiosity based on the individuals own inspirations to seek out information about religious teachings regarding 'proper' interpretations, conduct and the organising of society. This seeking of truth online, often leads people towards politicised religions teachings and organizations fighting for religion-based rule, and promoting simplified religious based

biased messaging, often delivered as a demand for individual action, to be recognised as a truly pious person. The second sequence, is when the individual becomes convinced by the messaging for themselves, and start to act as distributor of content, sharing and re-posting online accessible information. As such partaking in the spreading and to some extent verifying and legitimising biased information for an online or in-group audience. The third sequence, is when the individual takes on the role of content maker and source of biased content. That demands that the writer has a certain level of confidence of political religious knowledge and the necessary acumen, to produce relevant and persuasive content in an online space populated by a range of actors and interests. This the final stage of the sequence, is where dedication to the truthful cause is so deeply embedded in the identity of the individual that the choice of violence almost becomes a duty, in the progressive process towards religious duty, responsibility and status – the true believer that sacrifices. The act of violence becomes the awaited outcome of increased insights and requirements.

For sustainable impact, disengagement efforts must adopt holistic strengthening of personal agency and non-violent social norms to disrupt and transform the attraction of violent extremism. Prevention must therefore be adaptive, proactive, and embedded within the real relationships and digital networks that shape young people's everyday realities. Given the centrality of digital spaces in shaping engagement dynamics, improving digital literacy skills appears to be a viable strategy to help individuals navigate and critically evaluate online content and resist extremist messaging by fostering scepticism and resilience towards violent political propaganda. In addition, these strategies also need to take into account the dynamics of peer contagion—where mutual influence within online and offline networks accelerates ideological shifts—and integrate gender-sensitive approaches, recognizing how extremist narratives exploit masculinity and femininity in recruitment. These efforts will depend on the capacity to shape group communities, reinforce ideological narratives, and strengthen the affective bonds, that are oriented towards building positive social norms. For example, promoting local influencers, civil society and community leaders to spread moderate, peace-oriented messages online can help to counter

extremist narratives both on and offline, to enhance social solidarity and lower the threshold for ideological adoption, alignment and action.

As political extreme messaging for recruitment is facilitated by and through digital media, digital literacy stands out as a particularly promising and adaptable strategy for prevention. The focus on digital literacy and countering online recruitment is considered particularly promising specifically for three reasons, 1) it addresses the evolving nature of extremist targeted messaging, 2) It empowers individuals, especially youth, to critically evaluate information and resist extremist narratives, 3) it can facilitate counter-narratives and engaging youth in positive online activities. Furthermore, it can be integrated into existing educational systems and community programs, with the potential for wide-reaching impact, given the prevalence of social media use in Indonesia. As such, it enables the micro-levels of individual pathways in and out of extremist thinking, organization and action to be addressed. Yet, it does not address certain contextual political grievances and economic conditions, that also play a part in driving people towards extreme political thinking and acceptance of violence.

The focus on digital literacy and countering online recruitment as part of a way to prevent the spread of radical ideology and teachings to young people has finally become an important part that we propose to be added and revised to the Indonesian Terrorism Law No. 5 of 2018.

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About Author(s)

Heru Susetyo

Heru Susetyo is an Indonesian legal scholar and human rights expert who serves as a professor at the Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia, specializing in human rights law, victimology, social welfare law, and international criminal law. He is also active as a human rights lawyer and advocate, particularly on issues related to victims of crime and terrorism in Indonesia. He is a professor at the Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia. He has chaired the Center for Islam and Islamic Law as well as the research center for Social Welfare, Children Protection, and Global Migration. He has editorial responsibilities as Editor-in-Chief of Journal Hukum dan Pembangunan (Journal of Law and Development) and the Journal of Islam and Islamic Law Studies. He holds an LLB and MSW from Universitas Indonesia (1996 and 2003) LLM degrees from Northwestern University School of Law, Chicago, United States (2003), and Master of Islamic Studies from Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta (2022). He earned a PhD in Human Rights and Peace Studies from Mahidol University, Thailand. His main interests include Islamic law, human rights law, criminology and victimology, terrorism, social work, and international criminal law. He frequently writes on the protection and support of victims of terrorism and other serious crimes, arguing for stronger state responsibility and victim-sensitive criminal justice and media practices. He is a licensed advocate (PERADI). He has been involved with human rights organizations and victim support networks, including roles in Victim Support Asia and CENTHRA (Center for Human Rights Research and Advocacy) in Malaysia. Beyond academia, he regularly publishes opinion pieces in Indonesian and international media and participates in training, research, and advocacy on human rights and victim protection.

Reisa Suci Arimbi

Reisa Suci Arimbi is an academic affiliated with Universitas Indonesia whose work focuses on terrorism, radicalism, and human rights, with particular attention to Islamic terrorism and deradicalisation efforts in Indonesia. Her publications include work on "tackling Islamic terrorism and radicalism in Indonesia by increasing the sense of humanity and friendship," indicating a focus on more humane, socially grounded approaches to countering extremism.

Morten Koch Andersen

Morten Koch Andersen is a Danish scholar and practitioner who works at the nexus of corruption, human rights, and the rule of law, with a particular focus on South Asia and other regions of the Global South. He holds a PhD in International Development Studies from Roskilde University and has built an interdisciplinary profile spanning human rights documentation, public authority, corruption, torture, and impunity. He is a senior researcher and currently serves as director of research and education at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI). He has previously been a senior researcher at the Danish Institute Against Torture and a guest researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies.

Shr-Jie Wang

Shr-Jie Wang is a public health researcher and epidemiologist with more than 25 years of experience studying torture, organized violence, forced displacement, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), transgenerational trauma, and child and adolescent health in both post-conflict and conflict-affected settings. She is a Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor. She holds a Master of Public Health from Yale University School of Medicine and a PhD in Clinical and Interventional Epidemiology from the University of Basel, Switzerland. In addition, she has served as an Adjunct Associate Professor in the International Health Program at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan.

Her work frequently employs randomized controlled trials, longitudinal designs, and cost-effectiveness analyses, as well as translational research and implementation science. More recent research includes epigenetic studies examining how maternal PTSD during pregnancy may influence children's DNA expression and developmental outcomes, as well as evaluations of family-based interventions aimed at interrupting cycles of intergenerational trauma. She also contributes to international collaborative projects on school- and community-based interventions designed to strengthen mental health and prevent violence among at-risk children and youth. She is a member of the WHO Violence Prevention Alliance Research Priority Subcommittee and serves on the board of the Doctors Without Borders Foundation in Taiwan. She has co-authored scientific publications and public-facing pieces on trauma, human rights, and public health, including contributions to BMC research blogs in her role at DIGNITY.

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