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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Violence: Lived Experiences of Former Extremists

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the lived experiences and motivations of former Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members in the Southern Philippines, highlighting the complexities of violent extremism and the importance of effective reintegration strategies. Utilizing a transcendental-phenomenological methodology, this qualitative study collected in-depth interviews from ten ASG returnees in Basilan Province, uncovering the personal and social factors that influenced their decisions to join and leave the group. The findings illuminate themes such as hardship, regret, and the search for belonging that characterized their lives within the extremist group. Many former ASG members viewed their association as a means of refuge from societal stigmas and personal grievances, driven by a confluence of personal, ideological, and social factors. The influence of familial and peer relationships emerged as crucial in both recruitment into the ASG and the process of reintegration, underscoring the significant role of social networks in shaping decisions related to extremism and rehabilitation. Overall, the study highlights the necessity of addressing underlying socioeconomic and psychological factors to support effective deradicalization and reintegration strategies for former extremists.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism remains a global challenge. Extremist groups thrive by employing sophisticated recruitment strategies, often targeting vulnerable individuals with promises of a better life. The Philippines, particularly its southern region, grapples with the presence of several such groups, including the notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Founded in 1990 by Abdurajak A. Janjalani, the ASG, named after the Afghan Mujahideen leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf (Manalo, 2004), emerged as a splinter group from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Janjalani, inspired by Osama Bin Laden's ideology, disagreed with the MNLF's negotiation-focused approach and sought to establish a highly structured and disciplined organization committed to violent extremism. He strategically recruited young, educated Muslim leaders, particularly those with theological training from the Middle East.

The Philippine government has responded to the ASG threat with a two-pronged approach. On one hand, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) conduct offensive operations to neutralize the group's activities. On the other hand, the government, recognizing the limitations of a purely military solution, has implemented diplomatic initiatives aimed at encouraging ASG members to surrender.

One notable example is a collaborative program initiated by former Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Governor Mujiv S. Hataman, the local government of Basilan Province, the AFP, and various Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). This program successfully facilitated the surrender of 143 ASG members, offering them a path to reintegration through housing, livelihood programs, and educational opportunities. Today, these former extremists are experiencing the benefits of peaceful citizenship.

This case highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of combating violent extremism. While military force remains necessary to counter immediate threats, sustainable solutions require addressing the root causes of radicalization and providing viable pathways for disengagement and reintegration.

While scholarly research specifically dedicated to the lived experiences of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members remains limited due to the clandestine nature of the group and the dangers associated with conducting research in conflict zones, valuable insights can be gleaned from studies on similar extremist organizations and the broader literature on terrorism and radicalization.

Several studies on Southeast Asian militant groups offer relevant parallels to understanding the ASG. For instance, International Crisis Group (2019) reports on the ASG, while not focusing solely on lived experiences, provide contextual understanding of the group's evolution, motivations, and recruitment patterns within the complex socio-political landscape of the Southern Philippines. These reports highlight the interplay of local grievances, clan dynamics, criminal activities, and the allure of radical ideology in shaping individuals' paths into the ASG. Similarly, research on other jihadist groups in Southeast Asia, like Jemaah Islamiyah (Singapore, Malaysia), as explored in Feinman, et al. (2010) work on suicide terrorism, reveals the importance of social networks, personal connections, and ideological indoctrination in binding individuals to violent extremist organizations.

Furthermore, broader studies on radicalization and deradicalization provide frameworks for interpreting potential influences on ASG members' experiences. For example, research by Horgan (2008) on pathways into and out of terrorism highlights the role of personal grievances, group dynamics, disillusionment with violence, and the pull of family ties in shaping individuals' trajectories within extremist groups. Moreover, Sattar and Arriola (2020) suggest that madrasah education may play a role in preventing individuals from joining extremist groups.

This study explored the lives of Abu Sayyaf returnees in Southern Philippines. Specifically, this study sought to determine the live experiences, causes of joining in and out of former ASG members.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed a transcendental-phenomenological research design and was conducted in the Province of Basilan, Philippines. Situated within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Basilan is the largest island in the Sulu Archipelago, located off the southern coast of the Zamboanga Peninsula.

The island boasts a diverse population, with the Yakan, Tausug, and Chavacano being the three main ethnolinguistic groups. While Yakan and Tausug communities are predominantly Muslim, the Chavacano population is primarily Christian. The official language is English, but Yakan serves as the primary language and Chavacano as the lingua franca. Other languages like Tausug, Cebuano, and Sama are also prevalent.

Despite being classified as a 3rd-class province in terms of gross provincial income, Basilan boasts a relatively low poverty incidence (26.19%), ranking 20th out of 80 provinces in the Philippines. The province also exhibits one of the narrowest wealth gaps in the country, ranking 3rd nationwide, indicating a more equitable distribution of wealth compared to other regions.

This study focused on the experiences of 10 ASG returnees who had been members of the group for at least 5 years before rejoining society. These individuals were identified through the Prevention Against Violent Extremism (PAVE) program, which, as of May 5, 2018, had 143 beneficiaries participating in various project activities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected returnees at the Philippine Army-Special Force Camp in Barangay Cabunbata, located approximately one kilometer from Isabela City, the capital of Basilan. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from each participant. A phenomenological interview guide was used to facilitate the one-on-one sessions, and a voice recorder was utilized to capture the conversations for subsequent transcription.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

After thoroughly reading the collected data to gain insight into the lives of the informants, significant statements directly related to the research phenomena were extracted from their transcripts. These statements were then interpreted, clustered, and categorized into emergent themes.

The emergent themes directly addressed the study's sub-problems, encompassing both the positive and negative experiences of the informants within the rehabilitation programs. These themes shed light on the lives of former Abu Sayyaf rebels who have chosen to reintegrate into mainstream society.

The emergent themes, derived from the informants' responses, provide insights into various aspects of their experiences, including: their lives within the extremist group, their motivations for joining and leaving, the challenges they encountered upon their return, and their perspectives on the government's rehabilitation programs.

Listed below are the emergent themes developed from the typical responses of the informants of the study, namely:

Experiences as a Member of the Abu Sayyaf Extremist Group
1. Life of Difficulty and in Strife
2. Living in Regrets

Causes of the Informants' Joining In and Out of ASG
1. Seeking for Refuge
2. Birds of Flock are Same Birds
3. Living in Peace

The results were constructed to illustrate the comprehensive delineation of the lives of rebels who quit from the Abu Sayyaf Extremist Group and return to the folds of the government of the Philippines.

Experiences as member of the Abu Sayyaf extremist group

Extremist members' lives have shown constant struggles and escape from the law enforcement and the armed forces' eye. In the Philippines, Mindanao was identified as extremist-infested areas, particularly in places where development is slow. Western Mindanao region was one of the areas where extremist groups have emerged for several decades and continue to operate in the area. In this region, provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi were in constant attack by bombing and other extremist activities. However, due to the government's effort to end extremism in the country, many programs were devised to help those who wanted to return to the government's umbrella. Thus, this study presents the themes based on the data gathered about rebels' experiences with the Abu Sayyaf Group.

Life of difficulty and in strife

These themes deal with the lives of extremists in the mountain frontier. Their experiences were struggling to hide from the government forces. Being in the hinterland in Basilan Island under the extremist group, their experiences have shown difficulties and always hiding and running from the enemies.

In line with my inquiry objectives, I asked the informants about their circumstances, particularly on their experiences as a member of Abu Sayyaf Extremist Group.

According to Informant 8, he stated and revealed some of his life experiences by:

> *"Masi ne hadja niya peggeh bantuk nen niya pagsusunan ku duk niya pangaduh-nganduh ku peggeh jaman kami tuu si Tipo-Tipo sanyang hep kami amban pag iskul si patuwa si pamilya kami. Lai biktim ne kami niya ne kuweh alen kami si Abu Sayyaf, bisan pa hap tianggehin hunit ne kami tapili peggeh sampay mismu meh SCAA dumain ne hadja dambuwah meh military katalewanin sampay meh mismu meh saweh-saweh agen masi ne hadja kew pinaghellian iye ih bantuk nen niya pangandu-ngaduh ku. Peggeh tagnah*

mag iskul kami, janan ne hadja kami stop si pag iskul sabab saih lumamud ne kami si tumpukan (IDI8:SS3)."

(There were regrets and things that we are sorry about our stay in Tipo-Tipo. We were at peace back then when we were still studying. We don't have to be cautious about our identities and meet our families. But, when people knew about us joining the group (Abu Sayyaf), we couldn't even go to markets because it was not just the militaries that we are hiding from, we hid from the Special CAFGU Active Auxiliary (SCAA) and some of our companions because we can't completely trust them as well. I just miss the times where we don't hide from people).

Moreover, Informant 5 supported the statement of his constant struggle in the mountains:

"Time ku tagnah diyata niya waktu pain te dem sigpit du isab niya waktu dem kahapan du isab iye bantuk kahapin pain te bang baytu gana operation pain te nah hap-hap du isab relax isab bang niya operation iye ih kuweh bantuk kasigpit nen (IDI5:SS1)."

(During the time when I was still (living) in the mountains, there are instances when things are difficult, and times when it is well. When there are no operations, then we are well and just relaxed, nonetheless, we are at tough times when there are operations).

Informant 1 also elaborated how difficult to live in the hinterland hiding from the government forces:

"Niya ne hadja peggeh amban Allahu Taala ru bisan kew intag peggeh andang ih dem program weh Allah rizki nun kuweh niya isab pesongan ne bantuk nen gey ne hadja kew luhaya bisan pekew maka sin meh 10million peggeh gey dukew luhaya sabab nen nah kuntara kew sin government (pamarinta) sin Pilipinas bisan pekew sainge. Kahapan nen kuitu bisan pe isab gana sin nu peggeh iye du iyan sukpat anu ten sin bisan ganah arta nu peggeh laya nekew ganah ne ngulebean kau ok nekew sin government anu, ok nekew si sundalu, ok nekew si pulis sanyang ne (IDI1:SS2)."

(Still, there is because basically every blessing is from Allah, wherever we may be. But even if we own 10 of million, we can't still enjoy that because of the absence of freedom being the enemy of the Phil. Gov't. The good of what we are today, even if we don't have money, as long as we are free from the government and as well as the soldiers, we can already have a peaceful life).

Informant 2 pointed out some of his experiences as he experienced difficulty of life in the group:

"Dehellu-dehellu, pirmi delikado paten-naan-nun kuweh gah niya kasanyangan nu duk hati nen si patuli nu gey kew hinek, peggeh bang niya maggulesa pain nu mian nah kuntara ne ubus bang niya meh aa' mag guni-guni kew pain nu gah du ente inin meh spy miyaan, bisan agen kuweh pangandel nu si saweh nu atawa simeh usba nu kuweh ganah ne. Pasal iye biyaksa nekew saili peggeh pain te saih ne kasigpitanin bisan agen makakite aa' gey nekew tantu makakite gey nekew tapi si ka-aahan sabab iye niya ne lai hallian nu (IDI2: SS1)."

(At first, I was staying in a dangerous place where there is no peace at all, that we cannot even sleep well at night, and that we were always conscious of even the tiniest sounds thinking they signal the coming of our opponents. We trust no one, even our comrades or relatives because we got used to that kind of challenging situation in which we are cautious of meeting people and always keeping ourselves away from them).

Living in regrets

The extremist group's existence was fueled by ideology, making it continue to exist and recruit members from the peaceful community.

Informant 3 said that he had regrets in joining the group:

"Masi kite magsusun peggeh pagsusunan ten domain sabab peggeh pagtuud te pili si kakahinang ili peggeh kite ilamud hadja sinuspect buh gah tahinang te (IDI3:SS3)."

(We always regret because we joined the group unintentionally but for the reason that we were just suspected of doing things that we were not part of).

Same with Informant 8, he further supported that:

"Gah niya. Bantuk nen lai nah iye ru ien magtambay si siye bang niya lengan kapag lengangan nuhut siye pe bang niya operation na nuhut siye peggeh pain te niya kasanyangan sampay kapag pamilya maka hinang kemon ne kahapan meh lumah nah gah niya isab, iye bantuk nen peggeh kue dan buah lai focus in asal agama pinatenggehin buh bantuk nen gah tantu nengge manamal (IDI8:SS2)."

(There is none. Life is difficult, we feel so stagnant. We only feel our significance whenever we have operations. Because, whenever there are operations we feel like we are fulfilling our mission (for the sake of God). But, sadly it's not how it seems. We can't even build houses for our own family because we thought what we do is worth the sacrifice, but it appears to be not).

Informant 9 also shared his experience in the group about the teaching and ideology inculcated to them;

"Pain meh Abu Sayyaf in, dumain kami terrorist anak kew aa' bagindan duk aa' silangkung terrosist-in sugah meh aa' amban guwah lahat peggeh bang meh siye andang du kite muslim legleban de kite sugah peggeh kuweh anu ley amban Mindanao Duterte bisan iye dumain muslim kuweh ta jaga weh ne bang ine ie problemahin, saki MNLF, SAKI MILF, saki Abu Sayyaf dambuwah du Kemon (IDI9:SS3)."

(And then, the Abu Sayyaf would convey that we are not terrorist, we are children of Baguindan and people of Silangkung. But people from outside (Mindanao) considers us terrorist because we are Muslims. But Duterte knows better even though he is not a Muslim, he is well aware of the real problem, the diseases of the MNLF, MILF, Abu Sayyaf, it is just one).

Informant 2 shared:

"*Most of the members who joined were those who were not fully educated both in Islamic and secular knowledge. Those are the common reasons for the youth to join the group* (IDI2:SS5)."

In the statement of Informant 9, he shared his thought saying that:

"Masi ku magsusun, pegeh bang kew makakite ne meh saweh nu kuweh classmate ku mismu tagnah ku paguwah takite iye classmate ku Grade six (6) lai ne si meh opisina meh mastal ne pain ku tasambat kun bang ku miyan gah dialemin kuweh du hati kaamin sugah peggeh gah niya tahinang peggeh kalanduan ne (IDI9:SS3)."

(As for me, I can see my Grade Six (6) classmates, and it hit me that they had better life working in the offices and as teachers now, and I was able to realize that if I were not in the group, I would have been in the same position as you are. Nevertheless, there is nothing that I can do since it all already happened).

Causes of the informants' joining In and out of ASG

In every situation people were participating in an organization with the purpose to help, get along, or do business but in the extremist organization, the reasons were different. Some emergent themes show that most of the reason was due to the wrongly tag as members, running from their life as nobody sees hope due to their life status and was recruited or joined due to influences from the people around them.

Seeking for refuge

This theme focuses on the compelling reason why a member joined the group. Several instances during the interview that this theme had emerged. This presents that a peaceful person may still become an extremist group because he has no one to rely on when faced with difficulties in life and unfortunately, linked with the group.

Talking about their experiences, Informant 7 answered:

> *"Ah gana du isab, hangkan ne ili pi palamud peggeh kabayan bang si pikilan asal kahapan peggeh agama papilihanin"(IDI7:SS2)."*

> (I did not feel any (Sorry or regret), because the reason I entered (the group) was because I had something in mind, and that is to establish good deeds in my religion).

Informant 4 expounded his experiences by narrating:

> *"Tumatas kami lai si jamaa peggeg gana ne masa ley naima kami bisan dune kayi baya surrender peggeh bang ASG gey kami iaccept weh gobiyerno peggeh pain de terrorist koh kami (IDI4:SS6)."*

> (We were made to stay with the group that time because no one accept us even though we would like to surrender since we are ASG, the government doesn't accept us, accordingly we are terrorist).

Informant 9 in the interview expressed how he became part of the group by narrating:

> *" Tagnah kami paasek barkada dehellu pagbagay-bagay niya meh pikilan pain te disi Puruji bagay kami peggeh taga experience iye amban kami, tahinang weh kami ieh sampay taboo-boo magtagnah amban bagay ubus syempre bang ih meh bagay nu ne kaleman nune lagi meh pamilya. Kuweh inlove nekew si siye duk inumey nu si siyehin pain te sampay magdaruhun ne pain ne ih ne kaam piniha, sa hap-hap dendangan hap isab bang hekka ien kuweh palamud ne ih pikilanin (IDI9: SS2)."*

> (At the outset, we enter (the group) as group of friends, thus for friendship, and we had the thought that Puruji was a friend of ours who had already a lot of experiences. It all started with that kind of friendship until we were dragged (to do the same activities). Certainly, when they are your friends, you get reluctant especially towards their families, like you fell in love with them, so that it continued used to think that it is better to be with the group than be alone, that is why, the thought of joining came in).

Birds flock are same birds

Relatives and friends have a significant influence on the recruitment process from joining the extremist group. Relatives and friends generally play a role in shaping an individual's behavior and beliefs—through expectations or peer pressure. The more we interact with someone, the greater chance we have to shape his or her life positively or negatively and vice versa. Therefore, the people who tend to become the most significant influencers in our lives tend to be those closest to us—our friends and family. Thus, this was shown in this theme.

Informant 9 shared the reason why he joined the ASG as an extremist:

> *"Peggeh kami bang si pamilya andang kami kuweh force peggeh Puruji Indama, asal iye pamilya kami second cousin, peggeh bisan du time miyan meh mangiskulin kinasuhan gah pe matuk nah ine basta indama family nah hangkan gah niya gunah kami pamilya kami meh siit ku si Zamboanga duk meh lumah de balik siye padiyata pitu peggeh nuhut ne hap pe isab siye nuhut amban pain te lai hadja siye tasiggew (IDI9:SS1)."*

> (In my family's case, we were forced (to join) because of Puruji Indama. We are very much related as second cousins. During that time, we were being sued for bearing the name of Indama even we were students. That is also why even my uncles and aunts residing at Zamboanga left their houses and went back to the mountains thinking that it

is better than to stay and be caught. Oftentimes, when there are disputes, like in the presence of Kah Tuwan Hamza, we would witness (it), until such time that we already had the friendship and had adapted it (being in the battle ground) and that we would combat even though we are only two. That doing continued which led to more violation for when example there were presence of soldiers, we would plan not minding even if we were only like two persons against many of them, we will surely shoot even only once).

Informant 1 pointed the how he was able to join the ASG extremist group:

"Bennal nen ta recruit ku weh danganakan Nur-Hassan pagsakey ku tekka amban Saudi, Nampay Black list neku gey neku bahani paguwa (IDI1:SS4)."

(Actually, I was recruited by my first cousin Nur-Hassan immediately when I arrived from Saudi until I got black-listed having the fear of going out).

Informant 10 also added how he was able to be part of the Abu Sayyaf group as an extremist:

"Asal adjak kmi peggeh ekkah sawe-saweh kuda umulan, kasulutan be.peggeh saka ku tellungan siye malaihin (IDI10:SS3)."

(I was only influenced to join because there were a lot of us who were just my age. I just enjoyed it. In addition, 3 of my brothers are also in and one of them was killed at Mag-kawah).

Living in peace

As presented above, the family has an influential contribution to the ex-members of the ASG as an extremist, it also shows that family was the one factor for the ASG members to regain a peaceful life and return to the fold of our government.

Informant 2 shared his life experience on how his family influences his decision to return to the umbrella of the government:

"Hangkan ku kuweh paguwah taanu ku weh iye tinatasan kun piyen tahun ne gah du niya kasongan ne niya ne sampu tahun (10 years) ganah kasongan ne mag eekka hadja kuntarahin ubus bisan agen pamilya ku kuweh ne takuntara ku nah ubus hangkan ku anu teed paguwah takite ku meh paguwain dehullu amban akuhin kuweh ngasanyang siye hatinen kapi ne siye hap pamilya re misita, hap syudad pain te samiyaan meh Zamboanga, Isabela kuweh payaman ku mas hap ku paguwah tahatul ku iye pamilya kun mas hap pangahatul ku siyehin, katutukan ku siye, tapa adji ku, tapa iskul ku, duk supaya du isab pain te gumuwah ku hangkan ku kuweh paguwah peggeh takite ku isab paguwain kuweh sanyang isab amban kuweh life ku malai dialemin (IDI2:SS7)."

(The reason I left the group was because I realized that all the sacrifices, I made for a long time went to nothing and in my ten (10) years of being a member, I could not move forward with my life. I had tons of enemies and they just multiplied, to the point that some were already my relatives. Then I saw that those who surrendered had attained peace in a way that they were already free to visit their families, to go to cities like Zamboanga or Isabela. I realized that it would be better for me if I go out because I would have the chance to take care of my family in better ways, I would be able to focus on them too, and support them in their education. I really realized that I can have a better life outside than when staying in the group).

Likewise, Informant 10 of the in-depth interview narrated about his life experiences on how the family can influence on quitting from the group:

"Amban meh sabab paguwaan kun asal pamilya, gey siye ta payam-payam ku kinaugtu, Nampay tiggel ku manamal lai pusi Super (Husin) peggeh niya bagay ku kamanakan ne, siye du kahati kahalan kun duwangan (IDI10:SS7)."

(One of the reasons why I went out is because of my family. I couldn't stand seeing them starving. I stayed with Super (Husin) for a very long time. They were selected individuals who knew about my situation).

Informant 5 also confessed and said:

"Bang pain te pasal kahalan paguwah in ne, niya ne me istory mula-mula teed kuweh team leader Nur-Hassan Jamiri iye mismo sa osa mag convince boo ne kayi paguwah, pain ku bang amban akuhin gey neku mag papuwas (refuse) bang asal maksud nun paguwah pain ku gey neru ku paamban asal nuhut neku mag bagong buhay (IDI5:SS7)."

(If we talk about how I detached myself from the group, well there were stories coming from like team leader Nur-Hassan Jamiri, who had convinced us to leave the group and I said that I will not refuse such an offer. If the intention is really to go out of the group, I will not let myself be left, that I will surely join them to have a new life).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study employed Collaizzi's phenomenological approach to analyze the lived experiences of former Abu Sayyaf members who have reintegrated into mainstream society. The emergent themes shed light on their time within the extremist group and their subsequent return to the government side.

This study is grounded in three key theoretical frameworks: Merton's Relative Deprivation Theory (Longley, 2020), Gurr's Power Contention Theory (1986), and Jost and Sidanius' System Justification Theory (2004).

Robert K. Merton's Relative Deprivation Theory posits that rebellion arises from a discrepancy between "value expectations" and "value capabilities." Value expectations refer to the goods and conditions individuals believe they are entitled to, while value capabilities represent their perceived access to those resources. When individuals perceive a significant gap between their expectations and capabilities, frustration arises, potentially leading to anger and aggressive behavior, regardless of the perceived effectiveness of such actions.

Power contention theory, conversely, argues that rebellion is primarily driven by the perceived effectiveness of such actions. It suggests that while relative deprivation might contribute to dissatisfaction, individuals are more likely to rebel when they believe it will effectively address their grievances. Conversely, System Justification Theory postulates that most individuals possess a largely unconscious motivation to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo (Jost & Sidanius, 2004, 2010; Kay et al., 2009). This theory suggests that individuals might be drawn to terrorist groups because these groups offer ideologies that justify their grievances and provide a sense of belonging within a system they perceive as unfair or oppressive.

Experiences as a member of the abu sayyaf extremist group

The lives of former extremists are fraught with turmoil and difficulty. The following themes highlight the experiences of former ASG combatants as they navigate the challenges of reintegration:

A life of difficulty and strife

Every life stage presents unique experiences that shape us. For former ASG members, these experiences often involved hardship and even life-threatening situations. Forced to live apart from their families and constantly evade authorities, their existence within the group was defined by hardship and isolation.

This finding aligns with research highlighting the difficulties faced by individuals raised in extremist environments. Mattsson et al. (2016) note that extremist families often live in secrecy, making it difficult to understand their inner workings or intervene. Similarly, Sudhanshu and Alison (2005) identify poverty, deprivation, struggle for survival, limited educational opportunities, and a sense of simplicity as contributing factors to terrorism and extremism—circumstances mirrored in the lives of the ASG members interviewed for this study.

Living in regret

When asked about their motivations for joining the ASG, nearly all informants pointed to the influence of the group's doctrine, indicating that jihadist or religious ideology was a powerful driving force. Many described feelings swept up by this ideology, which ultimately led them down a path filled with regret.

This aligns with Speckhard's (2015) observation that terrorism often arises from a "lethal cocktail" of factors: a group with a political agenda willing to use violence, an ideology justifying terrorism, social support for such actions, and individual vulnerabilities that make individuals susceptible to recruitment. Within conflict zones, revenge and trauma, amplified by factors like poverty and lack of opportunity, frequently drive individuals to join extremist groups (Speckhard, 2015; Thajeel et al., 2024; Haider et al., 2023).

Research on jihadist bombers (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2007; Jumaa et al., 2024) reveals that while religious indoctrination played a role, personal motivations such as psychological trauma, a desire for revenge, and nationalist sentiments were often stronger factors. This study found that less than half of the bombers came from traditionally religious backgrounds, suggesting that strong pre-existing religious beliefs might offer a degree of protection against extremist ideologies.

Moreover, the radicalization of ASG members is likely linked to low literacy rates among recruits. As this study revealed, many members had dropped out of school due to financial constraints, making them more susceptible to indoctrination. This underscores the importance of addressing socioeconomic factors that contribute to vulnerability.

It is also important to note that there may be a discrepancy between a group's professed ideology and the actual beliefs of its individual members. While leaders might adhere to a specific ideology with clear political goals, followers may be motivated by factors like group affiliation or hatred toward a perceived enemy (Bell, 2000). This aligns with theories of system justification and social dominance, which suggest that individuals often defend existing social hierarchies, even when those hierarchies are oppressive (Jost & Sidanius, 2004). For example, individuals might tolerate economic inequality if they believe in meritocracy – the idea that success is based on effort and ability (Bartels, 2008).

Causes of the informants' Joining In and Out of ASG

Regarding the reasons informants joined or left the ASG, the following themes have emerged:

Seeking refuge

Many former extremists linked to the ASG viewed the group as a means of escape from suspicion, tagging, and a lack of hope in life, alongside a strong religious belief. For them, being associated with the ASG became a pathway to belonging, offering protection from allegations. Many were unable to defend themselves after being labeled as extremists, leading them to feel trapped and seeking refuge in the ASG to avoid potential repercussions from their supposed involvement in extremist activities, even in the absence of concrete evidence.

Additional motivations for joining the ASG were found in religious ideologies that are not strictly terrorist-related. These included references to the greater jihad in the Quran, which emphasizes an inner struggle for self-mastery and a moral lifestyle. Conversely, the lesser jihad is often framed as a defense of Islamic lands through military means, a narrative frequently employed by terrorist groups to justify their violent actions in the name of Islam (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2007).

Individuals experiencing alienation, depression, aggression, irritability, or dehumanization due to trauma often find themselves searching for answers to re-humanize themselves, regain a sense of belonging, and find meaning amid overwhelming horror (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2007).

As Shetty (1994) explains, those linked to extremism often start seeking out others who have rebelled similarly, whether in the same or a different environment, but with shared goals. Rebels challenging the status quo are not merely trying to create chaos; they are driven by a desire to act in ways that align with their values and priorities.

Further supporting this notion, Speckhard and Akhmedova (2007) identify several contributing factors to an individual's motivation to join militant groups, including a lack of previous knowledge about Islam, fugitive status, nationalism, loss of meaningful roles, psychological contagion, and networked recruitment.

Moreover, extremist activities are often motivated by ideologies that are consistent with broader myths or meaning systems. These ideologies frequently frame the struggle as one between good and evil, emphasize the cataclysmic downfall of oppressive powers, and glorify the righteous. Such belief systems promote self-purification, divine sanctioning of violence, and martyrdom as acts of justice. Youth are often socialized into these ideologies through families, peers, communities, educational systems (such as madrassahs), media, and political narratives (Gunaratna, 2002).

According to significance quest theory (Jasko et al., 2017), the pursuit of personal significance can increase the likelihood of extreme behavior. Additionally, radical social networks can influence an individual's intention to engage in violence through at least two mechanisms. First, when radicalized individuals validate violence as a legitimate means of achieving goals, such behavior is perceived as less extreme and becomes more normative. Consequently, this normalization decreases objections to violence and makes it easier for individuals to deviate from societal norms.

Birds flock are same birds

Relatives and friends have a significant influence on the recruitment process into extremist groups. These themes underscore the role of these relationships in why former ASG members were enlisted in the organization. Most informants shared the same faith, further implying that ties between families, relatives, and friends significantly contribute to how an ASG member gravitates toward extremism. Additionally, much of the recruitment occurs during adolescence.

Studies show that recruitment to extremist groups sometimes occurs through family members and close ties, but this alone does not explain the phenomenon. It becomes evident when we consider studies where two men, Rustam Ganiev and Arbi Baraev, served as vital hubs for networked recruitment. Ganiev facilitated at least five female bombers, and Baraev equipped at least two; another individual from Baraev's group went to Nord Ost after his death, alongside his relative Mosar Brave, who were both related (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2007).

Moreover, studies indicate that adolescents' writings frequently reflect the negative influence of peers. These peers, not always specified, are often thought to be friends who encourage negative behaviors, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, and neglecting academic responsibilities (Berndt & Murphy, 2003). Similar to these situations, evidence suggests that friendship and companionship also significantly contribute to an individual's recruitment into extremism.

Concluding the research done so far, it might be worth considering the possibility that the behavior of one person or group does not solely influence young people's decisions. In reality, young people are influenced by multiple factors simultaneously. Therefore, it is more important to analyze the interaction effects of behaviors from different groups. In other words, family members and friends influence young people's behavior simultaneously, in different ways, but cumulatively. Although the fact that more smokers increase the likelihood of starting smoking is not sufficient information, it is necessary to determine which combinations of influences significantly affect why people engage in terrorism (Aidla, 2011). Thus, the study establishes that family and friends can influence one's choices, extending beyond vices to include extremism.

Several theories explain why and how the behavior of people considered important to the young influences their behavior. A common viewpoint is that family members and friends influence young

people's behavior either directly or indirectly, or both. For example, according to Akers' social learning theory, the social environment has a direct effect on young people's smoking behavior (Flay, 1994). This means that family and friends serve as examples, and following and imitating those who are important to young people generates a stimulus to smoking (Bobo & Huster, 2000). Zhuravleva (2001) also highlighted the important role of family traditions, noting that smoking family members unconsciously convey that their behavior is normal and acceptable.

Living in peace

The recruitment process of extremists often involves influential figures such as family and friends. Conversely, when an extremist decides to return to mainstream society, they often realize that family and close friends are crucial in breaking away from groups like the ASG. This suggests that a strong support system is vital for extremists to regain their identity and pursue a peaceful life. Moreover, relationships with family and friends positively influence former ASG members, encouraging them to engage in discussions that lead to life changes. This support makes it easier for them to overcome the fear of returning to government society and living in peace.

Studies have shown that, for better or worse, family relationships play a central role in shaping an individual's well-being throughout their life (Merz et al., 2010). An essential aspect of social support involves the structure of the social network, particularly the types of relationships within it. The importance of having a reliable friend or family member to mitigate fear was crucial support for many (Annan et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

The experiences of former ASG members serve as a poignant reminder of the complexities surrounding extremism and the challenges of reintegration. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems aimed at preventing radicalization and facilitating the successful reintegration of former extremists into society. Addressing the socioeconomic factors that contribute to vulnerability, alongside promoting education and social cohesion, is vital for breaking the cycle of extremism and fostering a more peaceful future.

Addressing the root causes of extremism requires a comprehensive approach that considers the profound effects of social relationships and individual psychological needs. Efforts to prevent recruitment into extremist groups must focus on fostering strong community ties and addressing the socioeconomic factors that contribute to feelings of alienation and desperation. Understanding the complex motivations behind joining and leaving extremist groups is vital for developing effective interventions aimed at both preventing radicalization and supporting reintegration into society.

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