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Leaving Violence Unevenly: Asynchronous Trajectories among Ex-Prisoners of Islamist Militants in Indonesia

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Abstract

The article draws on 33 biographical interviews with ex-prisoners of Islamist militant groups in Indonesia. Most of the current research on leaving violent extremism treats behavioural disengagement and ideological deradicalisation as separate issues. However, this article proposes the concept of asynchronous leaving of violence. It outlines five processes: stopping violent actions, reorganization of network relationships, ideological revision, moral-identity reconstruction, and socioeconomic stabilization. These processes can unfold at different speeds and may even move in opposite directions. Through abductive thematic comparison, the article shows that imprisonment had different effects in each case. Imprisonment could have increased a person's reflective distance, provided prisoners with access to alternative interpretations, intensified the moral shocks they suffered because of their families, or, on the other hand, left their militant identities and networks unchanged. Sustainable change was more likely to occur when questions about one's ideology arose alongside a range of structures which help a person to return to civilian life, such as having responsibilities towards one's family, having reliable people to confide in, gaining recognition in the ordinary community, and holding a job which gives a routine and social value. In the cases where the respondents had abandoned violence but had still kept anti-democratic or Islamist political commitments, this illustrates why declarations of loyalty or the completion of a programme are not sufficient to demonstrate genuine transformation. The findings thus see disengagement as a socially organised and temporally uneven reworking of one's attachments rather than as a transition from one coherent belief system to another.

Introduction

How can a person stop taking part in violence and extremism? Despite its apparent simplicity, this question involves several different processes. A former militant might stop preparing to carry out acts of violence but could still regard democracy as illegitimate. In another case, a person might change their theological beliefs yet remain economically dependent on their former comrades. A third person might make a public declaration of loyalty to the state while still holding on to a heroic identity rooted in jihad. In a fourth situation, someone might change their behaviour, their networks, their beliefs, and their sense of self, only to discover that unemployment and social stigma make it difficult to keep up the new life. If all four of these scenarios are counted as having 'exited', then the category encompasses more than it should.

The situation is especially important in Indonesia. Since the transition to democracy in 1998, the country has had to cope with all sorts of Islamist militancy, including the ongoing organizational structure of Jama’ah Islamiyah (JI) as well as more loosely organized networks that back the Islamic State and Jama’ah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). In response, Indonesia has combined police actions and imprisonment with dialogue, religious counselling, assistance to families, and a number of initiatives designed to improve people's living conditions. In public and official discussions, they often refer to the goal as a “return” to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. It could mean legal compliance and loyalty to the State, as well as acceptance of Pancasila as the State’s ideology. Indeed, the return has also meant

leaving an extremist organization, rejecting violence, and a broader identity shift to be a “good citizen.” None of these meanings are identical, and they do not always happen at the same time.

Scholarly research has already shown that disengagement from violent activity is analytically distinct from deradicalization, which involves a change in beliefs (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009; Horgan 2009; Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014). Moreover, studies have identified push factors such as repression and internal group conflict, as well as pull factors such as family, employment, and other social connections (Hwang 2017; Barrelle 2015; Koehler 2017). Yet, a limitation is integrating separate dimensions into a single final status, whether or not the individual has disengaged. Another limitation is that family, work, prison, and community are generally regarded as 'factors' people possess. Despite the fact that they are relational contexts in which selves, obligations, and credible interpretations are reconstructed.

In order to overcome these limitations, the article provides a qualitative comparison of 33 former prisoners of Indonesian Islamist militant groups. The interviews contain details regarding the subjects' education, occupations, and family lives as well as the way in which they had been recruited, the courses that they had attended within the organisations, their experiences of having been imprisoned, the changes that occurred in their political and religious beliefs, and their aims following their release. The group consists of men and one woman and was recruited through both face-to-face and digital means. Some participants had only minor supporting roles, while others held leadership positions in military, technical, or preaching roles. The diversity of cases allows comparison not only of cases involving major changes but also of partial, pragmatic, institutionally mediated, and openly ambivalent exits.

The article presents two closely connected arguments. The first is that disengagement is asynchronous and entails at least five different trajectories. Each of which can in turn be looked at separately: behavioural, relational, ideological, moral-identitarian, and socioeconomic. The various trajectories may reinforce one another, but they may also lag behind, halt, or reverse direction. The term 'asynchronous' goes beyond the simple fact that disengagement and deradicalisation are different. It stresses the timing and order in which these changes unfold over an individual's life history. The unit of explanation is not the final exit but the developing profile.

Second, social reintegration of the ex-extremist prisoners into the communities depends on relationships that make a non-militant identity both believable and sustainable. For instance, families assign responsibilities and provide recognition. Those with religious or personal authority can maintain credibility even if others do not trust them. In the workplace, people plan their time and assign roles according to competence. In communities, individuals can be seen as parents, teachers, traders, workers, artists, or neighbours and not just as ‘ex-terrorists’. Although these support systems are not always positive, families may maintain contact with the militant groups. Former members' associations might preserve old hierarchies. The state’s programs, through the police Special Detachment on Anti-Terrorism, might promote legal compliance and ceremonies of loyalty. This may be followed by a framework in which prisons function as places of reflection or consolidation. This research found that

the effects of these systems varied depending on the specific relationships and moral values they promote.

This article advances qualitative sociology in three respects. It alters the current binary exit category with a processual distinction developed through a detailed comparison. It also links research on militant disengagement with sociological theories concerning role exit, moral career, stigma, and identity work. It shows that institutions function through relational and temporal mechanisms rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. As a result, it offers insights to frame how people leave demanding social worlds when their former beliefs, relationships, identities, and material dependencies do not all vanish at the same time.

Research Setting and Methods

Indonesia offers an example of great theoretical significance since the country hosts militant groups that have a variety of origins, structures, and connections to violence. The JI group established a fairly lasting organizational structure which covered educational, preaching, territorial, technical, and military activities. In contrast, JAD and those associated with the Islamic State were generally more flexible and more clearly embraced the takfiri position. Some informants passed from Darul Islam/Negara Islam Indonesia (NII—Islamic State of Indonesia) either through Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) or smaller networks. These differences matter, but they should not lead to a strict separation between 'moderate' organizations and 'extreme' groups. The groups' organizational methods, doctrines, and levels of violence varied over time depending on the faction, leadership, and the individual's position.

The state responded in several ways. Interviewees were arrested, questioned, detained in both special and ordinary prisons, contacted by the police and by officials responsible for countering terrorism, asked about their religion, given psychological assistance, had help arranged for their families, received training in the field of entrepreneurship, and were followed up on after their release. Therefore, the data allow for a comparison of how people perceive contact with institutions rather than permitting an assessment of any specific intervention.

The dataset includes 33 biographical interviews conducted in 2025, with transcripts totaling about 328,000 words. These interviews dealt with a wide range of topics such as education and religion, employment, marriage and family life, joining organisations, the roles they had and the people they admired, imprisonment, important life events, political and religious beliefs, their relationships with previous networks and the state, their financial position after their release, how they were received by the community, and their future aspirations. Thirty-two interviewees were men, and one was a woman. As indicated in the available metadata, their ages ranged from their twenties to the mid-fifties. Their experience with organisations consisted of JI, JAD, Islamic State-linked groups, NII, JAT, and the network linked to Noordin M. Top—a Malaysian militant linked to major terrorist attacks in Indonesia. Some held leadership positions the military, preaching, ntelligence, the treasury, or technical roles. Others were sympathizers or junior members.

We treated the 33 interviews as analytically identical cases. Although we kept differences in file format and provenance for audit purposes, we did not treat them as waves or as substantial strata. We assigned the cases codes R01 to R33. We have omitted all information relating to specific locations, names, aliases, and operational details. The authors translated the quotations below into Indonesian and slightly modified them for clarity without altering their substantive meaning.

The corpus has several important limitations. Because the interviews rely on people's memories of past events, they may have been affected by selective memory, post-hoc justifications, and a desire to meet social expectations. The people who took part in the interviews were aware that gaining the approval of state organisations and communities could have an impact on their lives. Moreover, some source documents contained remarks by the interviewer, had irregular formatting, or included questions that led the respondent to give a specific answer. The claims about organizational events and assistance have not been independently verified. For that reason, the analysis does not assign individual risk, estimate how common a particular thing is, or treat self-reported loyalty as conclusive evidence. Instead, it poses a different question of what distinctions and mechanisms arise when the narratives are compared with close attention to contradictions?

The research applied an abductive thematic-comparative approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). It alternated between the existing literature on disengagement and the new distinctions that emerged during the interviews. In the first phase, each transcript was summarised in the form of a case history, the narrative being structured around the subject's entry into the organisation, their attachment to it, their feeling of imprisonment, the key turning points in their experience, the ideological language they employed, their family life, their work, the stigma they endured, the state assistance they obtained, and their future plans. In the second phase the text was coded with reference to relational pathways, institutional recruitment, digital connection, moral certainty, status and competence, organisational opacity, prison reflection, relational shock, network continuity, behavioural cessation, relational disengagement, ideological revision, alternative identities, economic precarity, family support and injury, state encounters, community reception, and ambivalence.

In the third cycle the cases were examined from five different angles. First is behavioural, which meant the cessation of violent action or preparing for it or offering assistance in carrying it out. Second is relational, which involved withdrawing from positions of authority and reorganising social relationships. Next is ideological, referring to changes relating to violence, *takfir*, jihad, democracy, Pancasila and the state. Fourth is moral-identitarian, relating to the emergence of alternative roles and ways of understanding the self that were accepted by society. Fifth is socioeconomic, covering access to normal routines, a means of livelihood and non-military support. We did not combine these dimensions into a numerical scale. Table 1 shows the five trajectories of asynchronous disengagement.

Table 1
The Five Trajectories Constituting Asynchronous Disengagement

Trajectories	Analytical Questions	Evidence of Change	Counterevidence or Remaining Ambiguity
Behavioral	Have violence, preparation, facilitation, and readiness for action ceased?	Explicit rejection joined to consistent practice	Inactivity attributable only to incapacity, surveillance, or organizational collapse
Relational	Have command relations and exclusive ties been reorganized?	Clear boundaries and meaningful non-network ties	Continued subordination, concealed hierarchy, or dependence
Ideological	Have views of violence, outsiders, jihad, democracy, and the state changed?	Specific, coherent revision of prior justifications	Change of method without revision of exclusion or ultimate goals
Moral-identitarian	Does an alternative role provide social worth?	Recognition as parent, worker, teacher, trader, or citizen	Militant identity remains the primary source of distinction
Socioeconomic	Do livelihood and routine support the alternative life?	Repeated income, occupational identity, and non-network support	One-off assistance, failed enterprise, debt, or renewed dependency

The importance of negative-case analysis stemmed from our deliberate search for cases that ran counter to a linear narrative. For example, we examined cases in which change occurred without imprisonment, situations where change began before imprisonment, examples of social reintegration without deep ideological change, and instances in which Pancasila was explicitly rejected even after confrontation had ended. Four ideal-typical types were established, namely (1) multidimensional transformation; (2) normative reorientation based on incomplete evidence or unstable foundations; (3) behavioural disengagement together with ideological continuity; and (4) exit mainly as a result of organizational transformation. These types are heuristic summaries and not fixed classifications of individuals.

Beyond the Disengagement-Deradicalization Distinction: A Framework

In the literature on violence, a distinction has traditionally been drawn between preventing people from taking part and altering their beliefs. People might disengage for a number of reasons, including arrest, aging, experiencing burnout, facing pressure from their families, feeling frightened, due to the decline of an organisation, or as a result of a strategic decision, even if they still hold onto their ideological beliefs (Horgan 2009; Bjørgo and Horgan 2009). On the other hand, individuals may begin to question their beliefs even if they lack the practical means or the necessary social support to leave. This perspective contradicts the idea that a change in behaviour means there has been a change in people's beliefs. Yet

this two-fold division still brings together a wide variety of processes. The 'behaviour' aspect might involve abandoning violence, stopping the provision of logistical support, or simply losing the organisation's capacity to function. 'Ideology' might cover attitudes towards the killing of civilians, the practice of excommunication (*takfir*), opinions on democracy, views about Pancasila, the legitimacy of the state, and the desirability of an Islamic form of government. These different elements could change on their own. Furthermore, the distinction does not sufficiently emphasize networks, identities, and material conditions. A former member might cease to carry out attacks on civilians but still remain loyal to the organisation. He/she might cut off command links but still keep his/her morally exalted identity as a fighter, or might alter the doctrine even without a source of income or a non-military social life.

Current research on different methods of exiting radicalism is beginning to acknowledge this complexity. Barrelle's (2015) pro-integration model treats social relations, coping strategies, identity, ideology, and action orientation as interconnected. Hwang's (2017, 2018) study of Indonesian jihadists highlights the role of disillusionment, cost-benefit analyses, relationships, and changes in priorities. Koehler (2017) stresses the social and ideological aspects of deradicalisation. Marsden (2017) shows that reintegration has to go beyond the kinds of interventions carried out in prison. Yet no framework explains how these areas develop at different speeds, or how the mismatch between them affects the stability and meaning of the exit.

A criticism of the excessive focus on cognitive explanations lies in the sociology of conversion and role exit. Conversion is not simply a matter of accepting new ideas but also emotional ties, identity affirmation, and reinterpretation of one’s own life story (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1984). Likewise, becoming an “ex” involves disengaging from a central role, coping with the remnants of previous commitments, and assuming a new identity that others regard as legitimate (Ebaugh 1988). The former role does not simply disappear. It can still provide expertise, shame, pride, stigma, or social capital.

Militant organizations create highly structured social environments. They distinguish between members and non-members, offer a moral framework for interpreting conflicts, and assign specific roles to people. This is similar to what Becker (1963) called a moral career, since joining the group leads others to classify the individual differently and leads the individual to give a different account of their situation. It therefore follows that leaving the group involves more than simply withdrawing from it; one has to develop new ways of behaving and find new audiences who can accept and confirm an alternative self-image. Maruna’s (2001) research into criminal desistance also indicates that permanent change requires narrative reconstruction and the possibility of 'making good'. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) emphasise that being open to change, being exposed to a trigger for change, being able to imagine a new self, and having a revised evaluation of one's past behaviour are all important factors. These findings are very relevant to former militants, since 'triggers' such as experiencing family suffering or coming into contact with a victim only become important when they can be fitted into a different moral narrative.

Compared with many cases in which a person quits a position because of their occupation or misconduct, the original role might have been considered sacred. Far from weakening a person's identity, experiences such as sacrifice, imprisonment, and hardship can actually strengthen it. Difficulties that people outside the situation see as barriers can be seen internally as trials of faith. Even if a prison term leads to a withdrawal from an organisation, it can at the same time serve as a show of firmness. For this reason, new relationships and roles become especially important since they must offer moral value without asking the individual to stay militant.

It is never the case that ideologically exposing people leads them to engage in high-risk activism, just as beforehand connections, direct contact with an organisation, and progressive incorporation are important (McAdam 1986; della Porta 2013). The examples from Indonesia show the same relational pattern, but in the opposite direction: people leave when the credibility of previous authorities declines and when others have acquired the status needed to redefine obligations, harm, and religious duty.

The article uses the phrase "relational infrastructures of return" to describe the lasting arrangements through which these alternatives emerge. Here, the word "infrastructure" does not refer to a specific rehabilitation service. Rather, it denotes the network of relationships that makes repeated action possible. A person towards whom one has responsibilities. A place to which one can go for work. A neighbourhood in which one is accepted. A family role which involves obligations, and an interpretive community in which one can express doubt without being humiliated. These relationships not only provide stability to action but also alter its meaning.

In comparison with a list of protective factors, the concept has three merits. The first of these is that it is process-oriented: a spouse does not become a protector merely by being there, but rather the family gains importance as a result of the visits, the sacrifices made, the grief felt, the care provided, the conflicts that occur, and the way the respondent interprets these experiences. The second advantage is its ambivalence: the same kind of relationship may help someone leave or prevent them from doing so; it can act as a bridge to exit or, at the same time, pull a person into the relationship. Likewise, employment can lead to autonomy or, alternatively, may increase dependence on earlier networks. The third advantage is that it is interactive: change does not simply come about when an individual adopts a new belief, but is the result of other people continuously recognising and rewarding a different identity.

From this perspective, imprisonment, family and livelihood support, and theological dialogue should not be seen as distinct measures, since their effectiveness depends on whether they reform relationships and allow an alternative moral career to be pursued. It also means that 'return' does not involve going back to an untouched mainstream. Instead, former militants return to families which have been changed by their absence, to communities that might still stigmatise them, to labour markets where the effect of their skills and criminal records is particular, and to a state which is at the same time coercive, supportive and suspicious.

Entering a Militant Social World

There are many ways to enter a militant social environment. Recruitment usually takes place through ordinary institutions. The interviews indicate that people do not suddenly decide to become militant. Instead, they typically enter through institutions already seen as legitimate. For example, one might join a religious club at school, take part in the university's Islamic association, attend a pesantren, become involved with the local mosque, join a charitable foundation, take part in a study circle, build a friendship, have a tenant relationship, or make use of a family connection. R01 started attending a *halaqah* while still at secondary school. R02's involvement in religious activities on campus eventually led him to take on educational and managerial responsibilities. R14 got in touch with an old school friend, who seemed more observant, and first asked whether there was a religious study group. R32 became involved with the organisation as a result of an everyday relationship with a neighbour or tenant and only gradually became aware of the organisation's identity and duties.

This matters because it challenges the notion that extremist beliefs should be treated as a separate factor. The participants did not always choose an organisation from a clear ideological market; instead, they followed people they trusted, who in turn brought them into ever more restricted situations. In a number of cases, the organisation's name, the meaning of *baiat* (oath of allegiance), or the purpose of the training were not completely made known at the start. R24 said he had been recruited and trained before it was obvious that the activities were linked to JI. R27 also noted that some key features of membership were unclear. Trust took precedence over having all the necessary information.

These patterns are analogous to those seen in recruiting individuals for high-risk activism, since prior connections help reduce uncertainty and enable an understanding of increasing commitments (McAdam 1986). It also becomes clear that 'vulnerability' alone is not enough. Some respondents had suffered family disruption, economic difficulties, or a difficult youth. Others were well educated, employed, skilled in organizational work, and well integrated into their families. What they had in common was not a deficiency but rather access to social networks which turned their diverse life experiences into a shared moral goal.

There is also the option of speeding up the process digitally and then verifying it offline. In several instances, digital media had a decisive impact, particularly in cases involving JAD or the Islamic State environment. Previously, R13 pointed out the risk of 'learning religion from social media', noting that uncontextualised materials led people to feel certain before they met the corrective authorities. R31 remembered coming across material from the Islamic State on YouTube and Facebook when he was young, before joining an offline group and then moving on to a more militant network. Because he had technical skills, R18 took on a specific role in the transnational digital setting. R29's association with the NII in his family background combined with his ability to make connections via Facebook.

The evidence does not back up a straightforward theory of online radicalisation. Although digital media had the effect of speeding up access, expanding the range of possible contacts, and enabling movement between different organisations, commitment was usually the result of interpersonal authority, discussions in small groups, taking an oath, receiving training, or carrying out practical tasks. The online

and offline aspects were combined sequentially. Digital exposure was important since it contributed to the social relationships which gave an interpretation its authority and which allocated the individual a role.

It was described as an ecology of worth. Individuals remained not only because they had accepted the various propositions but also since the organisation caused them to develop into types of people who were regarded as valuable. A participant could take on roles such as preacher, trainer, treasurer, territorial coordinator, intelligence worker, technician, or member of a special team. As stated in R16, a selection process repeatedly evaluated young men before they were allowed to carry out operational work. This selection process turned uncertainty into distinction. The pedagogical and managerial skills of R02 became important within the organisation, R03's computing abilities were directed towards an information-technology function, and R18's knowledge of digital technology linked him with a remote centre of authority.

They also intruded upon people's private lives by arranging marriages themselves through the teachers and the senior members; the foundations connected education, welfare, and recruitment; and businesses and houses were part of the organisation's networks. Although religious terms distinguished between those inside and those outside the group, the boundary was determined by where one prayed, whom one trusted, and whose suffering was regarded as important. R14 remembered a time when the members saw Muslims who were not in the group as impure and avoided holding congregational prayers with them. These practices turned the ideological distinction into something that people regularly carried out and gave it a tangible form.

For this reason, later disillusionment usually focused on the everyday aspects of organizational behaviour. Interviewees pointed out leaders' inconsistencies. For instance, disagreements about money, a lack of organizational support for families, or a gap between the claimed brotherhood and reality. These matters were not simply administrative complaints. They weakened the organization's assertion that it adhered to a higher moral standard. The same kind of interpersonal relationship that made the doctrine believable could also lead to doubt.

Prison as a Heterogeneous Moral Institution

Prison is generally regarded either as leading to extremism or as a place of rehabilitation. The interviews, however, indicate that both outcomes occur and that several combinations are also possible. The impact of prison varied depending on who the respondent came into contact with, what materials they considered credible, how they felt about being away from their family, and whether the sentence fit into an established narrative of sacrifice.

For a number of the respondents, being sent to prison disrupted the normal routine of the organisation and provided them with some time for reading. Regarding this, R01 stated that the change had arisen from his concern about a sick parent and the fact that he had been reading a book which criticised

radical ideology. R02 stressed the value of prison discussions and the reading that introduced him to a wide variety of interpretations. For this reason, he could separate the ethical aspects of Islam from his commitment to a specific political form. R10 mentioned that he formally renounced his oath and learned from prisoners from different Islamic traditions. The exchange of ideas among them undermined the organisation's monopoly on legitimate knowledge.

It could not, on its own, correct people, since they had already encountered the state's arguments and could ignore them. Corrective interpretations became effective only when earlier teachers' credibility had already been damaged or when an experience raised a question the doctrine could not easily answer. Reading provided a vocabulary for the doubts that emerged in a relational context.

Accounts of the changes often mentioned the emotional impact of the family consequences. For instance, when R07 was in prison, his mother died, and he said that her death caused him to think about it continually and led to a moral injury since his commitment to the organisation had taken the place of a duty for which no compensation could be provided. R14 remembered seeing his parents cry following his arrest and, in his description of the event, he saw it as a kind of boundary. From that moment on he no longer wanted to make them cry and therefore looked for religious knowledge through more than one route. R23 noted that distant religious projects had, on many occasions, made one's own family the immediate victim, because the family members had to be educated, supported and looked after before anyone else far away could be saved.

Such cases are usually referred to as turning points, but the term might misleadingly suggest that a single event causes a change in a mechanical fashion. In the interviews, it was only afterward—through the course of the dialogue and the opportunity to take on a new role—that a death, a tearful visit, or an economic crisis acquired significance. The turning point was a series of interactions that developed gradually; although emotion broke through the abstract, relationships and interpretive resources turned that breach into a new understanding of responsibility.

The victim's lack of response also changed things. R22, who held a senior military position, is the most striking example. He said he could contradict counterterrorism officials, institutional representatives, and psychologists. However, a meeting with someone injured in an attack had a different effect.

No matter what they said, we might have replied; but upon seeing the man who had been killed, I was unable to speak. He didn't need a scriptural argument—he just showed me his body and told me what had occurred. It was at that moment that I came to the realisation that this was not the person we were looking for. (R22)

The significance of the encounter did not lie in the fact that it had presented a more satisfactory doctrine. Rather, in the way that it had narrowed the moral gap caused by the presence of the body. The man in front of him can no longer be described as a 'collateral' or 'mistaken target'. Later in his account, this experience led to a new understanding of pluralism, democracy, and the freedom to practice Islam in

Indonesia. The victim thus became, as Giordano et al. (2002) put it, a hook for change, with this effect stemming from a relationship that made the harm impossible to ignore.

It should not be suggested as a standard course of action since such interactions with victims could have a coercive effect. It might lead to carefully enacted remorse, or it might retraumatize victims. Sociologically, they matter because they can shift the relationship between abstract justification and actual suffering in cases of voluntary participation, thorough preparation, and ethical support.

It is just as difficult to hold an optimistic view of prison in other cases. The man known as R25, a senior preacher who had long moved from NII to JI, saw imprisonment in part as a place where teaching and religious services could take place. His moral authority did not vanish because of his imprisonment. R20 understood the difficulties he had gone through in terms of trials and steadfastness. Even after he returned to work and took part in social activities, he still believed a soldier should remain ready and that if "the doors of struggle" opened, he would have to face the battlefield. In this case, social adjustment existed alongside symbolic readiness.

Two more counterexamples show that imprisonment does not lead to transformation. In the case of R26, the questioning started before his arrest, and only after that was he sent to prison. The arrest therefore did not follow from the questioning. As for R04, he was not sent to prison. His change resulted from his intellectual development and from the collapse of the organisation, together with his continued pride in his previous experience of conflict. It follows that prison is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for transformation. It is an institutional environment which redistributes time, relationships, vulnerability, and the power to interpret situations. The effect it produces depends on the moral development that occurs within the institution and on the social world that is available afterward.

Asynchronous Disengagement

When the cases were compared, it was found that 'exit' broke down into five different trajectories. This occurred because no single indicator could reliably capture the interviews. An informants could be classified as having changed along one trajectory and yet still be continuous along another. The way in which these trajectories matched each other could change over time.

The first point concerns violence and the different ways it can be encouraged, for example by abandoning attack plans, making military preparations, recruiting people, providing logistical support, or demonstrating a willingness to carry out orders. This element is the one most directly related to public safety, but it has to be carefully interpreted since inactivity can be the result of incapacitation, monitoring, advanced age, or the collapse of the organisation. It does not simply indicate a rejection of violence. Also, someone might reject the use of violence while still supporting a non-democratic political programme. While it is important in itself to stop a particular behaviour. This does not explain why the violence has ceased or the conditions under which it might still be rejected.

Most respondents mentioned withdrawing from active involvement and stressed the importance of remaining in family life, keeping a legal job, preaching without violence, or leading a more peaceful life. However, since R20 still portrays itself as a soldier prepared for action, people's statements about inactivity should be considered alongside the other remarks. The analyst's role is not to reject any change merely because of the ambivalence shown, but to identify which aspect remains unresolved.

The section on authority, loyalty and social relationships is based on the idea that a complete break is not something that can realistically be achieved. People who have had previous connections may still be linked to one another through family ties, their neighbourhood, friendship or by giving help to each other. The key point is the difference between social contact and operational subordination. A number of the respondents drew clear boundaries with their former radical peers and took part in former-prisoner groups which focused on civic activities. Others stayed emotionally loyal to their former comrades even though they criticised the organisation. A third group stated that the dissolution of the organisation was the main reason why the command relationships had come to an end.

A similar pattern emerges in the need to establish new relationships. R33 stated that in situations involving illness or crisis within his family, "it was the community, not the *jamaah*, that took the first response". From this, he reached the practical decision that even if a person is a member of a religious group, they should not cut themselves off from society. This illustrates a change in how relationships are viewed: "Society" no longer refers to an undifferentiated external world but has become a network of people who have shown care.

The third option involves a number of questions which should not be confused: are Muslims outside the group legitimate? Is the indiscriminate declaration of disbelief rejected? Is violence against civilians forbidden? Is jihad restricted to warfare? Can Islamic values be realised in a democratic system? Is Pancasila accepted, tolerated or rejected? Does the Islamic state still remain the ultimate aim?

Many of the people who responded made considerable changes to this group. R06 clearly associated Pancasila with Islam and thus moved away from her previous radical associates. R10 altered her view to seek guidance from various Islamic authorities instead of treating state-linked religious practices as illegitimate. R22 reinterpreted the idea of iqomatuddin—that is, the establishment of religion—in ethical, worship-related, and socially beneficial ways, rather than in terms of military struggle. R33 accepted democracy and stated that his home is a peaceful Indonesia.

Others made selective amendments. R03 did not see himself as having ‘left’ Indonesia and found it pragmatically strange to use return-to-NKRI language. Although he stressed substantive justice rather than a formal caliphate, the idea had by no means vanished. R05 rejected the kind of violence carried out by the Islamic State while at the same time still favouring a caliphate. R15 based his life on prayer, healing, business, and the creation of employment, yet still referred to jihad as an elevated ideal. In all these instances, the individuals had not remained unchanged, nor had they been completely de-radicalised. Instead, they reinterpreted the ideal by narrowing it, placing it in a specific context, and repositioning it.

R29 is the most compelling negative case. After a long period and numerous sacrifices within the family, he gave up direct confrontation and instead focused on running a small business. Nevertheless, he stated, "To be honest, my ideology hasn't at all changed. At this moment I still do not accept Pancasila. The difference lies in the way I behave." This statement clearly distinguishes a person's ideological stance from their mode of behaviour. To regard him as either having been completely transformed or completely unchanged would be to ignore the most important theoretical aspect of the case.

Another point relates to the source of a person's value. Militant groups provided identities such as a fighter, preacher, leader, disciplined believer, or technically important cadre. Once someone has left such an organisation, a question arises as to their status. Ordinary life may then seem to have diminished moral value, and the public title of 'former terrorist prisoner' can erase all the other identities.

Individuals who offered alternative ways of living mentioned experiences in parenthood, teaching, therapy, entrepreneurship, skilled employment, religious service, and community participation. Respondent R12 demonstrated agency through his work as both a healer and an entrepreneur. R14 combined his job as a barista with his involvement in theater and also expressed hopes about getting married and looking after his parents. R28 maintained a respected religious identity by working as a teacher, even though this changed the social group associated with that identity. R31 began to take part in local activities such as tahlilan, even though he did not identify with the religious tradition that usually hosts them. Participation was significant because it provided social interaction and reflected a self capable of living with religious difference.

Such roles do not require people to forget their past. Instead, they allow past abilities such as discipline, public speaking, teaching, and technical skill to be separated from militant leadership and acknowledged in other contexts. This is similar to the concept of role residual as described by Ebaugh (1988), which states that even though the traces of the original identity still remain, their meaning can change. Reintegration is more likely to be successful when communities recognise a person's competence rather than requiring the individual to continue behaving like a repentant ex-militant.

A fifth trajectory also relates to the material aspects of everyday life. Many informants sold drinks, food, herbal products, livestock, household goods, or fruit. Others worked as drivers, baristas, cleaners, construction workers, teachers, administrators, technicians, or therapists. These activities provided more than just a means of earning money. They organised the day, made it possible to come into contact with people who were not part of one's social network or with one's colleagues, allowed care to be given to dependants, and served as proof that another kind of self could function.

Since the businesses in question were small, the markets were erratic. Imprisonment had either destroyed people's assets or disrupted their careers. Security of income was generally missing. Families had to cover legal fees, travel, lodging, and childcare. After his release, R13 was unemployed and faced stigma. Even though he was under severe financial constraints, R10 was looking after a large number of people. R23 had to rebuild the businesses he lost because of his arrest. Although R30 ran a food stall and R31 had a job, this gave them a sense of purpose, but not security.

The notion that poverty leads to terrorism has not been proven. Some respondents had secure educational qualifications and careers before becoming more deeply involved. In some cases, they were forced to quit their jobs because their organizations' duties took up all their time. After they leave these circumstances, economic instability can become significant, as it can undermine alternative identities and lead to a return to dependence on earlier networks. Hence, receiving a grant or a business package does not mean stability has been reached. What matters socially is a way of earning a living that is maintained through relationships with customers, colleagues, mentors, and family routines.

The four ideal types were obtained by combining the five trajectories. In seventeen of the cases there was generally a broad agreement regarding behaviour, relationships, ideology, and identity. Even though there was some difference in economic stability. In eight cases there was normative reorientation, but the evidence was incomplete. The boundaries of the relationships were not clear, or the material support was weak. Six of the cases showed behavioural disengagement but still maintained a good deal of ideological continuity. In two of these instances the situation was best accounted for by referring to organizational transformation or dissolution rather than by using an individualized conversion narrative. The figures concern the corpus under discussion and should not be taken as representing the general population.

Tabel 2. The Configuration of Disengagement

Configuration of Disengagement	Relationship among the Five Trajectories	Cases (n)
Multidimensional transformation	Behavioral, relational, ideological, and identity change largely reinforce one another; economic stability varies	17
Reorientation with unstable supports	Nonviolent direction is evident, but ideological evidence, relational boundaries, or material supports remain incomplete	8
Behavioral disengagement with ideological continuity	Violence is abandoned or reduced while important political-theological ideals persist	6
Organizationally mediated exit	Change follows organizational dissolution, authority, or strategic adaptation more than individual rupture	2

In the first instance—namely, in the case of multidimensional transformation—various mechanisms supported and strengthened each other. The moral shock from the family situation led to doubt, which they addressed by consulting books or talking to trustworthy people. As a result, the individual changed their views on violence and outsiders. At the same time, their position within the community and their job caused them to develop a new identity. For R22, being a victim prompted a review of both theological and civic matters. R32 adopted an anti-state stance after receiving care from their family, discussing it with officials, and drawing on the community's generosity. Later, they built a career as a fruit trader. R33 realised from the experience of the family crisis that ordinary neighbours showed a more reliable degree of solidarity than an imagined exclusive brotherhood.

They are the most important narratives regarding change, but they by no means signify the conclusion of the story; the alignment can be disrupted by economic insecurity, stigma, or a new political crisis, so the term 'multidimensional' must be understood as indicating that various different paths are currently supporting one another, not that the biography has come to an end.

The second arrangement shows a clear move toward ordinary social roles and nonviolent action, but in one or more instances the evidence is weak, or the situation is structurally unstable. Although R16 spent a long time in prison, this separation allowed him to acquire vocational skills in repairing air-conditioning units. Nevertheless, the record still gives little suggestion of a fully developed ideological reconstruction. R23 abandoned the previous methods and focused instead on fulfilling his family responsibilities as he rebuilt a modest livelihood. R24 regarded democracy as a practical arrangement but still favoured divine law. R26 expanded the meaning of jihad and criticised the earlier methods. The community's recognition of him as both an imam and a teacher helped drive this change, even as some political ideals remained.

This situation matters for intervention work because progress can be identified even without a definite name. Rather than assuming ambiguity, interventions should provide the missing support and closely monitor the individual's reasoning processes.

The fourth group consists of R03, R05, R11, R15, R25, and R29. Even though there were considerable differences among them, each of them gave a reason for keeping action, doctrine, and identity separate. A few of them rejected only the use of violent methods, others entirely reinterpreted Islamic politics, some retained heroic or jihadist symbols, and one explicitly rejected Pancasila. Still, they might live peacefully and be socially integrated.

State programmes encounter a kind of normative dilemma. Although a democratic state has a valid interest in preventing violence, it ought not to regard every non-liberal religious aspiration as one which might pose a security threat. For if ideological uniformity is enforced, this could lead to predetermined reactions and would hide the behavioural changes that are important. On the other hand, the programmes must not treat tactical quietism as if it were a complete form of transformation. A multidimensional profile allows for both conclusions. Violence may have been given up, even if some important anti-pluralist commitments remain.

The fourth type of case includes people whose departure was closely linked to changes in JI. For example, its public dissolution, leadership decisions, or a shift in strategy. R04 had not been imprisoned, and his situation did not involve a major personal rupture. R21 referred to an adaptive, citizenship-oriented approach while still maintaining a considerable Islamic project. Examples like this go against individualised theories which suppose that a single person carefully weighs up all the factors affecting him. Individuals who are part of well-disciplined organisations may leave when the authoritative structures within the organisation alter the meaning of loyalty.

The mediation of exit by the organization can very quickly reduce the group's ability to carry out violence. However, it raises an empirical question: have members accepted obedience to a new civic project,

altered their earlier moral boundaries, or merely carried out a command they trusted? The answer may vary from one member to another and could change if the authority splits.

The evidence indicates that lasting change cannot be achieved through ideological correction alone. People must also be able to repeatedly assume non-militant relationships and roles. Several ways exist to return to a previous state. In the interviews, family was the most common moral audience. The effects became obvious from the parents' tears, the death of a mother, the way a spouse endured the situation, and the stigma suffered by the children. Furthermore, family members provided housing, made visits, gave financial assistance, offered emotional care, and gave reasons to plan for the future. Because of this recognition, respondents could speak in terms of care when describing their sense of responsibility, rather than in terms of making sacrifices for an abstract community.

To speak of family as a 'protective factor' is too simple. In some cases, family relationships exposed respondents to militant ideologies. Wives and children were able to take part in social networks that had been shaped by the organisation. Families also suffered as a result. They were subjected to searches, lost their income, felt ashamed, experienced separation, had to look after their children on their own, and lived with the fear of being drawn back into the network. It was reported that the mother of R22 had been traumatised and had therefore tried to move geographically away from the network. R29’s spouse moved house, looked after him, brought food during his visits and sold the land while he was in prison. A programme which regards these sacrifices merely as ways of bringing about a change in the prisoner fails to bring the sufferers into view.

A family functions as a system of support when the duties involved are renegotiated, wrongs are acknowledged, and members receive assistance. It fails when help is offered on the condition that the people are being watched over, when the care responsibilities grounded in gender are ignored, or when someone uses the term 'family' in a rhetorical way without making any changes to the everyday responsibilities.

Another approach was made possible by the credibility of the people involved and by the fact that there were several different interpretations. Even though informants had been trained to deal with state representatives, the difference came not from the encounter itself. Rather, it was from the speaker's credibility and how the interpretation was carried out. Prisoners who shared the same political beliefs, religious teachers, former members, victims, and officials who had assisted families could acquire unexpected authority. Their credibility usually arose precisely because they did not begin by demanding submission.

Interpretive plurality undermined belief in a single, true Islam. R02 concluded that Islamic values could be found in different kinds of political systems. Although R07 accepted a range of interpretations, he still retained a deep religious enthusiasm. R10 learned lessons from traditions previously rejected. This was not an example of secularisation but rather a reorganisation of religious authority and a shift from an exclusive to a contested interpretation.

In fact, when they first returned, many communities felt fear or distrust. The people interviewed said that they felt embarrassed, concealed the truth, and were worried about their children. Yet ordinary activities could change how people viewed them. For instance, taking part in buying and selling, teaching, attending neighbourhood rituals, helping at a mosque, performing theatre, or serving as an imam proved that the individual could have a useful role.

Simply receiving formal release is not enough to achieve complete social reintegration. Research into desistance and reintegration explains that individuals leaving violent extremist groups can still find themselves in a socially marginalized position. Suspicion, damage to their relationships, and a lack of opportunities. All of this makes it hard for them to develop a sustainable identity after their time as extremists (Nugent and Schinkel 2016; Marsden 2017). Reintegration therefore goes beyond merely addressing a discredited identity or demonstrating ideological conformity. It also depends on relational recognition. For example, being seen as a legitimate member of the community and having one's abilities appreciated regardless of their extremist past (Weaver 2016). It was important that R26 was accepted as a religious teacher and that R28 was given a teaching role because these positions associated moral worth with a wide audience. They enabled both respondents to become socially useful people rather than remain former extremists whose only public value stemmed from giving testimony about extremism.

Earning money from jobs and business may have helped people to return. It can create social links that extended beyond former comrades. For instance, selling drinks or repairing equipment could give former prisoners daily opportunities to demonstrate their competence. Indeed, it became a practice of reciprocity. Customers—and the community—may evaluate the service rather than judging individuals by their ideological background. The money earned not only let people support their families, but also turned an abstract duty into concrete action.

Livelihood programs were not always successful for ex-terrorist prisoners. This was mainly because programs often gave out equipment or capital without providing market access, mentoring, or help developing a sense of occupational identity. When a small business fails, it can shame a person and, as a result, increase dependence. Support is more likely to be sustained when it connects people's current skills with customers, encourages learning among peers, incorporates cash-flow planning, and sets up recognised professional roles. The objective is not to give economic assistance but rather to create a situation in which work can help to stabilise the individual.

In the end, some respondents altered their views of the state after receiving help from officials, being treated with respect, or being assisted in their work. Respondent R13 compared the opposition he had previously shown to the state with the concrete support which his family had received. R20 stated that it had been the counterterrorism agents and not the organisation that had provided help during his time in prison. R32 mentioned encounters which cast doubt on the idea of a single, uniform enemy. The material aid thus became proof of a relationship.

This approach carries an interpretative risk. Even if benefits are linked to statements of loyalty, one cannot assume such statements reflect genuine belief. On the contrary, strategic conformity may be a rational response to surveillance and to one's own needs. Furthermore, this kind of compliance should not be seen as insignificant because repeated cooperative interactions can themselves change expectations. The appropriate methodological step is to separate out the material, relational, behavioural, and ideological effects rather than forcing them all into a single criterion of success.

The distinction between behavioural and ideological aspects is expanded by the idea of asynchronous disengagement since it takes into account time, relations, identity, and material life. The five trajectories should not be regarded as stages, since it is not necessary for a person to experience behavioural disengagement before undergoing ideological revision or to carry out ideological revision before moving on to relational exit. Doubts concerning R26 arose before he was imprisoned. In the case of R29, although his behaviour changed, his political beliefs did not. R04 changed without any result from his experience in prison. While R20 achieved ordinary social participation yet still had a language of readiness for combat. The trajectories represent configurations. The way in which their alignment is dependent.

This approach alters the research question. Instead of investigating whether a former militant has been deradicalised, the researchers can ask which practices have ceased, which command relationships have changed, which moral boundaries have been changed, what kind of identity is now valued, what material relationships underpin it, and where the opposing commitments still persist? Questions like these lead to descriptions that are not only more accurate from a sociological standpoint but also more useful for justifying ethical policy.

The responses are asynchronous. People may genuinely value their families. They may reject harming civilians or taking part in community rituals. At the same time, they may also desire an Islamic political order. These positions do not necessarily indicate a deceptive mixture that can be reduced to one true belief. Instead, they illustrate the uneven way a moral world is being reconstructed. Qualitative analysis is particularly well suited to identifying these distinctions, since meanings change across contexts rather than reducing them to a single composite score (Aspers and Corte 2019).

Family, work, prison, and community are often considered factors that influence an individual. The findings suggest a more relational approach to understanding existence. Instead of viewing a parent's death as amounting to 'family pressure', it changes the moral weight of sacrifice. Employment includes more than just a source of income. It brings together time, competence, customers, and care. Being in prison is not simply a matter of exposure. It transforms authority and proximity. Community acceptance is not just a background condition. It is obtained through a series of acts of recognition.

The concept of relational infrastructure highlights this pattern of repetition. It also explains why similar interventions may produce different effects. A book becomes important when a person is willing to question and trust the interpretive situation. A victim encounter matters only when it does not fit into any existing category. A business grant is considered relevant insofar as it results in an occupation rather

than in an object. A former-member association matters insofar as it supports civic roles, rather than strengthening hierarchy and dependency.

Research on militant exit is connected to studies of the sociology of becoming an ex. Previous identities continued to exist in the form of competences, vocabularies, relationships, and public labels. In some cases, people changed preaching into teaching, discipline into work, or organizational ability into entrepreneurship. In other cases, they still made a moral distinction on the ground of having been a tested fighter. Therefore, exit became a struggle over the ownership of one's biographical resources.

Winning others' approval mattered. However, it is difficult to hold on to a new identity when neighbour or authority figure only sees him as a former prisoner. At the same time, constantly referring to the individual as a 'repentant terrorist' can, in another way, freeze the past. In the best situations, the respondents had become ordinary and important—people who were needed as parents, traders, teachers, technicians, or neighbours. For reintegration, it was not necessary to be socially invisible. Rather, what they needed was the chance to be more than their previous role.

The above discussion has implications for future research and policy. The analysis must focus on providing a profile rather than coming to a conclusion. To carry out a longitudinal qualitative evaluation, researchers should record evidence and counterevidence for each of the five trajectories. Where ethically and practically possible, gather input from respondents, their family members, community members, and work mentors. The assessments have to make the distinction between criticism of the state and a readiness to commit violence, as well as between social contact with former comrades and loyalty to a command structure.

Families should be seen as individual entities with a right to both psychosocial and material assistance, rather than as things to be monitored. In theological dialogue, reliable partners should be involved. There should be room for questions to remain unanswered. Workplace assistance should be based on an ecosystem that includes skills, markets, mentoring, and recognition. Victims must give their consent to participate, and their trauma has to be taken into account. State aid should not ask individuals to make ideological declarations since such declarations would reward performance rather than honesty.

The fact that such recommendations are made does not mean the security concerns are baseless. Many of the narratives include reasons to support their validity, along with romantic memories or vague connections. On the other hand, multidimensional analysis improves security by avoiding both false reassurance and false equivalence. A person may have a low behavioural risk without at the same time supporting liberal democracy; similarly, it is possible for someone to use democratic language while still being materially and relationally dependent on a militant environment. Only by examining the configuration and how it changes over time can we capture the difference.

Conclusion

One does not all at once cease to engage in militant violence. The cases of Indonesia described here show people undergoing gradual changes in their behaviour, social relations, ideology, sense of moral identity, and material situation. Sometimes imprisonment caused reflection. At other times it intensified the moral weight of the family's suffering. Other times, it enabled alternative interpretations, and at times helped keep the story of steadfastness alive. The effect of imprisonment varied by the individual's background and the relationships that existed before, during, and after imprisonment.

The notion of asynchronous disengagement provides a term for this failure to align. It indicates that an exit category can include deep transformation, a strategic withdrawal, the selective revision of theological beliefs, obedience within an organisation, and precarious material efforts to begin again. The idea of relational infrastructures of return shows how change can become manageable—through people and environments that consistently provide obligation, interpretation, recognition, routine, and a sense of worth.

From a sociological point of view, people don't escape demanding social situations by changing their minds alone. Rather, they do so by altering their relationships and securing a following for a new version of themselves. The previous identities still exist as remnants, resources, and temptations. The new ones must be backed both materially and through relationships. A democratic approach therefore should not call for complete ideological conversion. Nor should it treat simple compliance with rules as full moral transformation. It should allow people to live peacefully in a pluralistic fashion, and in a way that society appreciates, while remaining conscious of the aspects that have not yet changed.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Hakimul Ikhwan led the study at Gadjah Mada University Indonesia and worked with Noor Huda Ismail to develop research's conceptual framework, methodology, and research protocols to safeguard participants' rights and safety. Hakimul Ikhwan oversaw the informed consent process, including explaining participants' rights and the study's risks and benefits, and took responsibility for accurate and ethical reporting and dissemination. Noor Huda Ismail coordinated the research team's adherence to ethical principles and study procedures and oversaw data protection, including the anonymization and confidential handling of participant information.

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