

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists.***  
By Julie Chernov Hwang. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University  
Press, 2018. Hardcover: 206pp.

According to an influential thesis by David C. Rapoport, terrorism comes in waves. But amid the current “Religious wave”, it is easy to lose perspective. Militant Islamists of previous generations, like the hijackers of 9/11, are now followed by those of the iGeneration. For these young militants, the 9/11 attacks are pixelated images from a distant past of phone booths and dial-up Internet. The Religious wave seems endless.

Yet we know that terrorists do, in fact, quit. This is the starting point of Julie Chernov Hwang’s book, *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists*. Hwang’s work builds on a research agenda that is more closely associated with criminology than terrorism studies, in which researchers seek to explain “desistance” — an offender voluntarily ceasing to commit crimes. Yet research on terrorist desistance is relatively rare, despite the generous funding that has been made available in recent years for highly experimental intervention programmes under the rubric of countering violent extremism (CVE).

In her study, Hwang is careful to distinguish *disengagement* from the more contested notion of *deradicalization*. Her focus is on the former, which is typically defined as ceasing to take part in violence. “The term connotes a change in behavior”, Hwang explains, “in contrast to ideological deradicalization, which denotes the delegitimation of the ideology underpinning the use of violence” (p. 4).

Hwang’s findings are based on extensive fieldwork over a six-year period during which she conducted over a hundred interviews

with 55 Indonesian jihadists. The greatest contribution of the book is its richly detailed biographical summaries of five jihadists — some named, some anonymous — who each receive a dedicated chapter. The jihadists are quoted at length, bringing their process of engagement and disengagement to life for the reader. Anas — a Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militant who took part in the Ambon conflict — describes with insight his attraction to armed jihad: “When I was there, I became addicted to it. We have to be aware that jihad is addictive. Some people say that violence is like opium” (p. 82).

From such interview data Hwang identifies “patterns of disengagement” from which she derives four factors that cause terrorists to disengage from violence. None of the four are new to the literature on desistance. Importantly, however, Hwang demonstrates that her informants needed a combination of more than one factor, sustained over a period of time, before they disengaged. If engagement is an addiction, kicking the habit is hard.

Disillusionment with terrorism as a tactic was one factor in the disengagement process, but by itself it was not enough. Disillusionment plus a negative assessment of the costs and benefits of taking part in violence was sufficient, Hwang argues, to cause disengagement. She notes, however, that such disengagement was “within the parameters of the [jihadist] network. There was little, if any, evidence of reintegration” (p. 173). Hwang concludes that when it comes to full disengagement from terrorism and reintegration into mainstream society, having access to an alternative social network of supportive friends and family members was the key factor.

Despite its clear strengths, *Why Terrorists Quit* does raise some methodological issues. The most obvious of these relates to the “why” question, and is the hardest to resolve: interviewing terrorists who have quit in order to infer why terrorists quit is a form of sampling on the dependent variable. Acquiring a representative sample of terrorists is perhaps an impossible task. But such a sample might find that the patterns in the biographies of disengaged terrorists are also found in still-engaged terrorists. Terrorists who have not renounced violence might also express disillusionment and question the costs of carrying out attacks.

Another problem relates to “terrorists”. Whatever one’s definition, terrorism is a tactic found across various conflicts. Yet Hwang’s sample draws heavily from one conflict in particular, the conflict between Christians and Muslims in Poso, in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Poso conflict reached its peak in 2000 and declined following

the Malino peace process in 2001. Although outside groups such as JI became involved in Poso, the conflict was communal in nature and local factors dominated. What generalizable conclusions can we make about why terrorists quit from studying militants who took part in communal violence in Indonesia and “disengaged” following the peace process? The answer is not clear.

Finally, even for members of JI — the central Indonesian militant group — how does one measure disengagement when terrorism was never a tactic the group adopted as a whole. JI’s default setting, for strategic reasons, is to avoid violence while prioritizing recruitment and training. Desistance from violent terrorist acts, when such acts are relatively rare phenomena, tells us little about the underlying problem.

Despite these issues, *Why Terrorists Quit* makes a singular contribution to the policy debate on countering violent extremism. Hwang’s research indicates that most terrorists disengage through the support of their family and friends. By contrast, didactic top-down intervention programmes by the Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Bureau (BNPT) have been largely ineffective. Based on interviews with civil society actors, Hwang finds that “BNPT deradicalization efforts are frequently criticized as poorly conceived and implemented, disconnected from the actual needs of the target population” (p. 150).

This disarmingly simple conclusion has profound implications for countering violent extremism programming in general. If the most effective disengagement processes take place in families and neighbourhoods, outside of national security institutions, perhaps all CVE programmes should be reformulated as “community resilience” programmes and run from the ground up. By focusing on healthy bonds among parents, children, families and friends, such local initiatives might avoid the stigma of securitizing language that can further alienate communities vulnerable to radicalization.

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