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When Terrorist Disengagement Processes Are Consistent with Previous Violent Radicalization: Two Case Studies

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Abstract

Although terrorist disengagement is a dynamic process, this study proposes the likelihood of a continuity in the prevailing factors influencing exit from terrorism and the prevailing dimensions which initially influenced violent radicalization. Through the analysis of two contrasting cases featuring third-generation Muslims formerly involved in jihadist activities in Spain, we assess a connection between the prevailing push and pull factors which sparked individuals to cease their terrorist engagement and the predominant dimensions that earlier prompted the radicalization which led them to terrorist involvement. Drawing from in-depth interviews with the two former jihadists, Hassan and Omar, conducted while they were serving prison sentences for terrorism offences, we suggest that the significance of ideology and network in, respectively, their journeys from Islamic fundamentalism towards jihadism is similarly reflected in their accounts of ending jihadist involvement, even in the presence of secondary factors that also play a role in such a complex process.

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Introduction

Terrorist disengagement is a dynamic and complex process (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014: 647). Drawing primarily on in-person interviews with former terrorists, research has identified push and pull factors that play a role in individual paths away from terrorist participation (Bjørgo, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Alonso, 2011; Reinares, 2011a; Reinares, 2011b). Push factors relate to the personal experiences of individuals while engaged in terrorism that drive them away from involvement. They include unmet expectations, disillusionment with strategy or actions and with personnel, difficulty with clandestine lifestyle, inability to cope

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with violence, loss of faith in the ideology, and burnout (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014: 648-649).

As to the pull factors, they are considered outside influences that lead individuals to cease their terrorist involvement and adopt a conventional social role. Among these are competing loyalties, employment and educational demands or opportunities. However, push and pull factors frequently combine or cooccur, influencing the individual decision to disengage to varying degrees. Specific factors may exert a greater impact on certain individuals while not affecting others in the same way. (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014: 649-650; Altier, Boyle & Shortland, 2017: 325).

Drawing on the push and pull framework, researchers have associated key terrorist life-cycle events with the decision to abandon violence. Some studies have connected experiences during the stage of terrorist engagement and subsequent disengagement (Altier, Boyle & Horgan, 2020; Corner & Gill, 2020). Other studies have considered the entire 'arc of terrorism' (Horgan & Taylor, 2011), suggesting that motivations influencing the radicalization phase, which precedes the engagement phase, are also connected to the factors that lead to exit from violent extremism (Bjørgo, 2011; Horgan et al., 2017). Our article precisely aims to contribute to this latter line of inquiry in an attempt to explore and help specify the relationship between the processes of entry –including radicalization— and exit of jihadist terrorism (Horgan, 2009; Venhaus, 2010; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Webber & Kruglanski, 2018; Reiter, Doosje & Feddes, 2021).

Scholars across diverse disciplines have long pondered the extent to which entry and exit processes are interconnected. Research on role exit has posited that role disaffiliation is a discernible process separate from role socialization (Ebaugh, 1988). This is partly explained by the diverse nature of doubts related to role commitments that trigger exit, often associated with events occurring after role assimilation. Within the realm of social movement studies, it has been argued that decisions to exit are based on a constant reassessment of the incentives associated with militancy (Klandermans, 1997). As individuals engage with a movement, new experiences emerge that alter the costs and benefits of remaining active. These considerations may or may not be related to the entry reasons depending on whether needs and motivations have remained constant or changed throughout participation (Nascimento et al., 2021). In a

different domain, life-course theory of crime (Laub and Sampson, 2001) suggests that risk factors associated with the onset of criminal behavior can be seen as interconnected to the turning points related to crime desistance.

Here we argue that attending to the main dimensions that drive radicalization can, in cases where motivations are markedly stable throughout engagement, offer insights into understanding the subsequent disengagement process. More specifically, we show from the analysis of two case studies that the main push and pull factors that arise during terrorist disengagement consistently refer back to the dimension that dominated the initiation of violent radicalization, irrespective of the addition of other factors. Through this exploration, this paper enters into a discussion about how ceasing participation may be linked to the absence or inadequacy of satisfaction for the individual reasons and motivations that initially inspired involvement. With regard to homegrown Muslim radicalization in the West, empirical research has identified that the reasons and motivations that produce violent radicalization are related to four main dimensions: addressing personal and collective grievances, integrating into networks and interpersonal ties, engaging with political and religious ideologies, and participating in enabling environments and support structures (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

The article is structured as follows. It first presents the methodology of the study, including the justification for case selection, the data collection techniques, and the analysis method. Next, it introduces the two case studies, following their processes from their early stages of radicalization, through their engagement in jihadist activities, to their eventual withdrawal from terrorism. Finally, the discussion and conclusion explore how a connection is established in both cases between the predominant dimension of violent radicalization and the prevailing factors influencing their disengagement from terrorism, acknowledging the presence of additional push and pull factors in the process.

Methodology

This study reconstructs the terrorist career of two former jihadists who are very similar in their sociodemographic characteristics –which allows to control for these aspects in the

analysis—, but fundamentally variate in their radicalization and disengagement processes. The selection of the two study cases, those of Hassan and Omar (pseudonyms used for confidentiality purposes), is based on the premise that they embody contrasting situations, which provides a suitable basis for exploring the links between entry and exit from jihadism in greater depth (Yin, 2017). By adopting a process exploration approach, the analysis provides insight into the significance and effects of the main radicalization dimension or disengagement factor that drives their personal evolution.

Hassan and Omar are both males; born in the 1980s; natives of two analogous North African cities under Spain's sovereignty which are frontier municipalities with Morocco; third-generation descendants of grandparents who migrated from Morocco to Spain; holders of the Spanish nationality; and raised in dysfunctional families. They differ in socioeconomic status and educational level. Additionally, both individuals underwent processes of violent radicalization in their home cities and adhered to Islamic fundamentalism –understood, as in Salafism, in terms of strict adherence to, and literal interpretation of the Qur'an as the revealed word of God (Taylor and Horgan, 2001; Wicktorowicz, 2006)— before becoming jihadists, a path which has been emphasized as particularly important in the trajectory towards violent radicalization and terrorist involvement (Kepel, 2017).

Hassan radicalized in Melilla, where he was arrested in 2014. Omar underwent a similar path in Ceuta, where he was arrested in 2013. In 2015, Melilla and Ceuta had a similar population of, respectively, 84,570 and 84,692 (Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, 2015). Individuals of Moroccan origin and Muslim cultural traditions are estimated to comprise around 52% in the former and 43% in the latter, three quarters of all of them being Spanish citizens (Observatorio Andalusí, 2016; Belmonte, 2010). Although both Hassan and Omar were convicted of participation in a jihadist terrorist group, Hassan had disengaged prior to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment, whereas Omar started to move away from violent extremism while serving a long prison sentence.

Data on these two case studies comes from in-depth interviews conducted separately in Spain, inside the state penitentiaries of Albolote, in the province of Granada, during February 2020, and Algeciras, in the province of Cádiz, during July 2021. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to elicit life history narratives. The standard

questions explored the personal and family background of the interviewees, their violent radicalization, their entry into Salafi jihadism, their disengagement from violent extremism, and even their post-incarceration prospects. Interviewees were encouraged to answer the questions in detail and to dwell on those events that had particular significance in their lifecycles. The interviews, one lasting slightly over 2 hours and the other about 2 hours and a half, were recorded and transcribed verbatim before codification and analysis. The interviews are part of a larger ongoing project in which some 36 jihadists convicted of terrorism-related offences and incarcerated in Spanish prisons were interviewed in 2020 and 2021[2]. Out of the total of interviewees, 4 are categorized as third-generation but only 2 of them, the individuals who are the focus of this study, underwent processes of terrorist disengagement.

Authorization to conduct the interviews was granted by the Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias (General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions), a division within the Ministry of the Interior. Interviewees were enlisted on a voluntary basis, with stringent measures in place to safeguard their confidentiality and the integrity of the information gathered. Before initiating the interviews, the researchers provided the interviewees with an informed consent document and verbally informed them of their rights as interviewees and the obligations of the interviewers regarding the custody and handling of the collected data.

The interviewees were informed about the strictly academic objectives of the interview and that participation in the study would have no legal or penitentiary consequences, be they positive or negative. This approach aimed to mitigate potential social desirability bias in personal narratives. Nevertheless, it remains impossible to exclude the possibility that the interview dynamics were influenced by both the circumstances in which they occurred (in spaces chosen by prison directors, though without the presence of anyone unrelated to the study) and the implicit, while not inherently decisive, characteristics of the interviewers (two white, non-Muslim researchers from the middle class with higher education degrees).

The information drawn from these interviews was triangulated with evidence obtained in the criminal proceedings available for each case at Spain's Audiencia Nacional (AN,

[2] The research project, supported by a contracted agreement subscribed between the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos and the Real Instituto Elcano, has been developed between 2020 and 2023. Both interviews were jointly conducted by the first author and Dr Carola García-Calvo, also member of the research team, to whom both authors express their deep appreciation.

National Court). the sole tribunal in Spain with nationwide jurisdiction over terrorist crimes other than the Tribunal Supremo (TS, Supreme Court) as appeal court. While these judicial sources, which include national and transnational law enforcement reports, corroborate details of key importance in Hassan's account, such documentation suggests that Omar avoided or distorted in his testimony some well proven facts. However, the punctual inconsistency between Omar's personal narrative and the documentary evidence we examined does not significantly alter our understanding of his radicalization and disengagement.

Hence, throughout the remainder of this article, we present the case studies of Hassan and Omar. We trace their processes from the early stages of radicalization, through their involvement in jihadist activities, to their eventual withdrawal from terrorism. Finally, our conclusions highlight a clear connection found in both cases between what was the predominant dimension of their violent radicalization and then the prevailing factor influencing their disengagement from terrorism, while acknowledging the incidence of other dimensions of presence of secondary push and pull factors in the process.

The interviews were analyzed individually and iteratively, mapping out the stages of the terrorist lifecycle of Hassan and Omar. Firstly, a detailed chronological reconstruction of their radicalization, involvement, and disengagement was created. The personal narratives were scrutinized using a thematic analysis method to codify elements related to the dimensions of radicalization (Hafez & Mullins, 2015) and the push and pull factors (Bjørgo, 2009; Horgan, 2009) that influenced their disengagement. The longitudinal examination of each case sought to validate the presence of a dominant dimension motivating radicalization and assess whether its significance aligned with the main push and pull factors of disengagement.

First Case Study: HASSAN

Hassan is a male born in Melilla, a city where he lived until he was arrested in 2014 at the age of 26. He holds the Spanish nationality, as do his father and mother, both of whom were also born in Melilla, but of Moroccan origin. Therefore, in relation to his migratory ancestry, Hassan belongs to the third-generation. Although his family is of Berber ethnic origin –

common among Melilla's inhabitants who are of Moroccan origin— Hassan's mother tongue is Spanish. Hassan himself describes his family, certainly of Muslim background, as "traditional". Yet, neither his father nor his mother were practicing Muslims.

Hassan socially positions his family as follows: "We were middle class... somewhat upper-middle class, we lived well." In fact, Hassan grew up in the center of Melilla where a vast majority of residents have ancestors from the Iberian Peninsula –where mainland Spain's territory extends-- and of Christian –meaning Catholic— tradition. What's more, Jewish neighbors lived in the centrally located building where the family rented during Hassan's childhood. However, when Hassan was a teenager, his father bought a house in a different neighborhood of Melilla whose residents are predominantly of his same Rifian provenance –from the Rif region in northern Morocco— and Muslim tradition. This change of residence greatly upset Hassan:

> The problem is that he bought the house in a Moor neighborhood, and for me it was terrible... My world came crashing down because they took my friends away, the atmosphere was different... It felt like I had moved to a different country. And at first, I didn't want to go. I would say: 'Dad, I just don't want to live in this crappy neighborhood,' 'I want to live in the other neighborhood, this neighborhood is awful!'

Apart from this change of home address, Hassan's parents wanted him to get a good education. In this pursuit, his mother played a pivotal role:

> My father was a businessman; he was away from home all day... He had affairs with other women. You hardly ever saw him. But my mother has always been very on top of me. My mother overprotected me a lot. 'You stay to study,' 'have you read?', 'have you finished studying?'; 'Yes, Mom'; 'Well, I'll let you watch TV for a bit...'. My mother has always been very on top of me. 'You have to study,' 'you must always get the best grades, otherwise, the kids will make fun of you.' And I got good grades. No one can tell me: 'you're a dumb Moor.' No one can say: 'that Moor doesn't know how to speak.' Not at all. Many people have lived in other neighborhoods, but they go out, meet others, go to one neighborhood, then to another... That was not my case. I've spent a lot of time at home.

Despite his parents' Muslim background, Hassan completed his primary education at a private Catholic school in Melilla. He then continued his secondary education and high school in public institutions in the city. After that, he started his university education through distance learning.

"I belonged to the sect that was saved from hell"

Hassan was a child who neither identified himself as a Muslim nor perceived any ethnic or religious differences among his schoolmates. He recalls instances when they referred to him with phrases like "I mean, the Moors…" or "you, Muslims..." to which he would often reply with: "I don't know what you mean by 'you guys'!', I'm from here!". This remained the case until the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, DC. Hassan was in his early teens at the time, and he reminisces about it as follows:

> When 9/11 happened, I did have some sort of perception like, 'Oh, so these people are Muslim'. The media, or at least how I experienced and understood it, portrayed it as the Muslims attacking the West... 'Ok, well, my name is Muslim.' In other words, 'I am also Muslim.' And I thought: 'So, there seem to be two sides... because Muslims and Christians don't get along... And why have I grown up among Christians?' But I didn't give it much importance.

A few years later, transitioning from a Catholic school to a public –non confessional— high school, Hassan began to notice the ethnic and religious differences that he hadn't noticed before, despite having been born and raised in Melilla. In this new context, the pressure from his peers, then middle adolescents like him, led Hassan into a situation of cognitive dissonance, that is, psychological discomfort caused by inconsistent cognitions which commonly occurs as an individual strives toward consistency within himself (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Janos & Levy, 2015). Hassan started feeling that he was not behaving in line with his already assumed Muslim identity:

> Muslims, Rif teenagers speak with other Rif teens, mainland Spaniards talk with mainland Spaniards, Jews converse with Jews... that's how it is. Gradually, I

> began seeing myself in a different environment where I didn't express myself as I believed I should. Someone asked me, 'Why don't you pray?', 'I've never prayed at home.' 'Well, dude, you have to pray.' Ramadan approached, and I thought, 'It's a whole month, and if they don't observe it at my home, why should I?' Some were learning to write Arabic, and they said, 'Do you know how to write Arabic?' 'No, I don't.' They responded, 'Well, what a crappy Muslim you are.'

Hassan then began to attend a mosque in Melilla to pray and engage himself inside a practicing Islamic community. This change in behavior can be interpreted as an attempt to alleviate the anxiety or discomfort he felt due to the lack of coherence between, on the one hand, his newly adopted attitudes or beliefs and, on the other hand, his actions.[3] However, as he delved into practicing Islam, he also drew coincidentally closer to members of a Salafist group who attended his same place of worship[4]:

> In the mosque I saw that there were people who were different. They had beards, they wore distinctive clothing, and the rest of the Muslims disliked them. I thought, 'Why don't these people behave like the rest of the Muslims?'. That was intriguing to me. So, I approached them and realized they all spoke like me. I asked, 'And you, why do you dress that way when you speak fluent Spanish? You didn't come from Morocco.' They answered: 'But that's not relevant. I'm not Moroccan; I'm a Muslim.' And that's how it all began...

Soon, members of this Salafist group started giving him books by authors such as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Abdlulaziz ibn Abdullah ibn Abdalrahman Ibn Baz –sheikh Ibn Baz—, or Saleh ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan.[5] Their writings contributed to Hassan's fundamentalist indoctrination in concepts like *tawhid*, *hakimiyya*, or *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which he explicly evoked and define Salafism in addition to other characteristics (Hafez, 2007, 66-70; Brachman, 2009, 3-103). They also instilled behavioral guidelines —primarily "prohibitions"— on how to interact with non-Muslims, where to reside, how to dress, how to eat, or which laws to deem as legitimate. According to his testimony, there was only one thing

[3] Implicit in this description of Hassan's conduct is the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).
[4] On Salafists and Salafism see Wiktorowicz, 2006; Lauzière 2016;
[5] About these and other Islamic *ulama* or religious guides who articulated the Salafi doctrine and worldview, DeLong-Bas, 2008; Brachman, 2009, 3-103.

that was off for him: the "extreme submission to Saudi Arabia" displayed by the group members.

Since Hassan joined that Salafist group in 2006, he embraced, just as his members would reiterate to him, on the basis of an understanding of the *umma* as an imagined worldwide community of believers in Islam, the idea that "the umma is in a state of decline because it has adopted Western customs". As an example, at the start of his indoctrination, they would tell him: "Look at all the drunkards out there." This immediately made him think of his father: "My father has always drunk. He cheated on my mother. So, of course, I saw the world they were presenting to me –a world of righteousness, where you could marry a woman but not deceive her... That world they presented seemed much more moral to me than the one I was living in."

But Hassan encountered strong opposition from his mother to the fundamentalist trajectory he had taken, as well as disapproval from most Muslims who comprised the Islamic community of the mosque where he began praying. However, if it had not been for his mother's reaction, he would have forsaken his university studies, as the members of the Salafist group he had joined were urging him to do.

> I started studying Salafist sources in English, began studying Arabic... and, of course, I posed questions to them that they couldn't answer. They took me to Nador. There was the leader, who was running things with direct contact to people in Saudi Arabia. He sat me down, told me: 'You have a great level, we're going to make you a proposition: these doubts you have; you can solve them directly in the Holy Kingdom, are you in?' I felt very flattered. I wanted to go and become a Salafist preacher... But I talked to my mother about it, and she almost defenestrated me. So, I declined the invitation.

Nevertheless, Hassan remained within the group, whose members tried to increasingly isolate him: "I gradually reduced my friendships, reduced my social circles, until I was left with almost nothing." When asked what motivated him during those moments to still remain

loyal to the Salafist group, he replied: "that I belonged to the sect that was saved from hell, that I had friends who cared for me like nobody else did."[6]

"All that led me to switch sides"

In 2009, Hassan took notice of some young people who frequented a mosque in Melilla known as the Salam Mosque or the White Mosque. This mosque is situated in La Cañada de Hidum, a neighborhood in the city whose residents are predominantly of Moroccan Berber origin and live in conditions of spatial segregation and societal marginalization that likely have facilitated the penetration, over the last two or three decades, of Salafism in general and Salafi-Jihadism in particular. He shared his observations with a prominent member of the Salafist group he was part of at the time:

> 'Hey, these people dress like us. They dress similarly and have beards... I don't know, I see them as Salafists.' 'No, no, those are jihadists!' 'But what do you mean 'jihadists'?' 'Don't you remember what I told you about Bin Laden and such? Well, they are that. They say it's okay to plant bombs, that we should kidnap people, that His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia isn't a good Muslim... Who do they think they are to say that! None of them have even studied!'

That year, during Ramadan, Hassan noticed that the members of his Salafist group would show anger and moved elsewhere when "the others" appeared while they were together in a mosque or a café, referring to them as takfiris or Muslims who use *takfir* as the process of declaring another Muslim or group of Muslims a religious apostate (Brachman, 2006, 44-51; Maher, 2016, 71-107). These "others" would pick on the Salafists, saying: "Where are the defenders of Saudi Arabia? Fakes! Liars!" Hassan was bothered by the fact that the members of his group would ignore the takfiris instead of engaging with them. "You can't sit with them, it's forbidden", they would tell him, "Shaitan, the devil, if you listen to them, they can lead you astray and get you caught up in their world."

[6] By attempting to emulate the practices of Islam's first three generation of Muslims, which are held to constitute a golden era of authenticated and orthodox Islam, Salafists believe that only they constitute the so-called "victorious group" or "saved sect" (Maher, 2016, 7). Over the past few centuries, the concept if the saved sect has dominated Salafi discourse (Abu Rumman, 2017, 42-49).

As a result, he repeatedly refused to meet with the jihadists. Until one day, as Hassan claims, he fell into "a trap." Someone invited him to have a meal at a house in Melilla, where, unbeknownst to him, the takfiris were going to be present:

> I don't know who got me into that mess... I don't know what kind of gathering it was... I walk in, and I see 'the others' come in behind me, and they're even more intense, like they've been working out, you know, they are strong. They sit down, I find myself in the middle, and I think to myself, 'they're going to kill me right here.' They say, 'you people are the dogs of Saudi Arabia, you follow Saudi Arabia, you're funded by Saudi Arabia.' That's where some contact was established. I spent the whole night arguing... In that specific point, they're right. After that meeting I had, my perception of them changed a lot. And I ended up embracing the doctrine that they presented to me.

Hassan then began to frequent the mosque where the members of that jihadist group congregated in, all of whom were from Melilla and mostly of Spanish nationality, supporters of Al Qaeda –"many of these members then took it a step further. They went to fight with Al Qaeda in the Sahel"–. The following is how he describes his shift:

> Things changed very little because essentially the doctrine remained the same. The only thing that changed was the assessment on Saudi Arabia. There was a lot of talk about things like *Sharia,* and we spoke ill of the rulers: 'That Mohammed VI dog, look at what he's done,' comments like that. And *hakimiyyah* was emphasized a lot, very much. And then... what stuck with me is that they had an entire book of *fatwas* from Saudi clerics. I looked at that and thought: 'either I leave Salafism, or I become a jihadist'. And at that moment, I didn't have the intellectual capacity to leave Salafism.

Both Hassan's disappointment with his former Salafist brothers – "they obviously deceived me" – and his visits to the mosque of "the others" eventually severed his relationship with the Salafist group he had been immersed in for three years. However, before this, they gave him an ultimatum: "They told me: 'Look, you can't pray in that mosque, you can't

associate yourself with those people,' 'if you do so, you separate yourself from us, you confront us, then we must apply the laws of *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'*".

In Hassan's words, "all of that led me to switch sides,". It was the end of 2009. Leaving the Salafist group and joining the jihadist group brought about changes in his personal circumstances and in his religious activism. This was, on the one hand, due to decisions made within his new group that he came to accept, such as the decision to thrust him into sectarian marriage:

> The first thing they did was marry me off. It was a girl who didn't know much... who almost lost her life because, one day, an overdose... I felt really sorry for her, I saw that she had changed, and I mistook those feelings for love. And I married her. She lived in her house, and I lived in mine, but I had this pressure to... live with her. And to live with her, I quit studying at university. I started wearing the robe everywhere, I put on a cap...

Other changes in his personal circumstances and religious activism were self-initiated – "when I felt liberated, I started watching videos from *al-Muhajiroun*... and I liked that very much".[7] "I don't like violent content, because of my personality." Hassan notes that gradually, he became much more involved –"I started getting more engaged"– and highlights his online activism, something the members of his new jihadist group suggested –"they proposed it to me"– and which he pursued for proselytism and recruitment purposes:

> I had a blog. I started publishing, translating texts… I tried to collaborate and attract many people. I had a Facebook profile, a YouTube profile... My blog was called *Sharia4Spain*. I considered the country to be Spain, *Al-Andalus* was the name it had in the Middle Ages. So, I thought: 'Well, if there's *Sharia4France*, *Sharia4UK*... then I'll call it *Sharia4Spain*.'

When Hassan had doubts about his beliefs or hesitations regarding his jihadist engagement, he explains how the group had a mechanism to counteract those feelings: "They... jihadism has a sentimental tool called *nasheed*", meaning here an Islamic song consisting of vocals either sung *a cappella* or, uncommon among jihadists, accompanied only

[7] For an empirical study of *al-Muhajiroun* and its outreach activities, see Wiktorowicz (2005).

by percussion. He adds: "They... at all times... they were like: 'Want to listen to a bit of *nasheed*?' I remember that when you put that on... after a couple of hours, any doubts you have disappear."

"A personal, intellectual evolution"

About three years after joining jihadism, Hassan began to be critical of the Salafist and Salafi-Jihadists understanding of *hakimiyya* –"I realized that Islamic law is based on conventions and that there were four schools of thought, which contradicted each other"–, and he started asking questions "that went beyond orthodoxy". In his own words, this was part of "a personal, intellectual evolution", "I no longer saw myself reflected in what I was. I evolved intellectually." Hassan had almost completed his college degree –"I had practically finished my fourth year"– and at that moment "I was very influenced by a course that helped me a lot which was called History of Ancient Religions. I started reading the Quran like a historian and thought: 'Wow, I really messed up big time.'"

Furthermore, his marriage to a radicalized girl arranged by his companions from the jihadist group "was terrible" because "she saw that in my daily life, I wasn't as she had believed me to be. Many times, I would evade myself, many times I would wake up late for prayers, many times I would spend the entire day on the computer." The personal consequences of such a crisis soon became apparent:

> I would have many days where depression would hit me, and I would disappear completely. Because I had to wake up in the morning and dress in a certain way, speak a certain way, and it's like a prison because I had to be with the same type of people all day, and I couldn't relate to other types of people... I was completely isolated.

Hassan wanted to leave the jihadist group and cease his engagement within it during a pivotal moment for its members, right when the war in Syria broke out. The activities and propaganda of organizations like the Al-Nusra Front –an Al Qaeda branch operating in that country—, but above all the latter's former Iraqi branch configurated in April 2013 as Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and in 2014 as Islamic State (IS) –at the same time as its leadership proclaimed a new caliphate which lasted until 2019—, prompted an unprecedented cycle of jihadist mobilization in Western Europe (Neumann, 2016; Reinares, 2017). This jihadist mobilization had a global reach (Benmelech & Klor, 2020). However, it did not affect Hassan, who was in his mid-twenties at the time:

> When the Syrian conflict started, I was in a very retracted phase where, due to my intellectual evolution and my situation, I no longer wanted to be involved. So, I wasn't there. Two years earlier, I most likely would have been involved, but that wasn't the case.

Hassan felt unable to act upon that due to his isolation: "I had been avoiding going to the mosque for a long time and spending all day in the library hiding so that no one would see me because I didn't know how to get out of there. I had no one. I had cut ties with all my friends, cut ties with my mother… I was alone." A rather idiosyncratic push factor was then added to this pull factor –"my wife reported me to the mosque, because they also used that mosque as an Islamic court"– and the combination of both factors, pull and push, led to Hassan to be excluded from the jihadist group, as he desired, but somewhat forcibly:

> They confronted me, saying: 'We have accusations of impiety... because you made these comments, because we don't know where you are, we don't know if you're with the police, you've disappeared from our radar.' Well, between one thing and another, they decreed my expulsion, the expulsion from the mosque. At that moment, my wife was expecting a child, and they said: 'The child stays with us.' I said no. I said that the child was mine. Then they brought my wife in. She tore into me, humiliated me in such a way... In front of everyone. It's something I'll never be able to forget. I said: 'Well, fine, I'm leaving.'

This happened in 2013. Once out of the jihadist group, Hassan rebuilt his life in Melilla: "First thing I did was apologize to my mother... I shaved, felt completely free, started working as an administrative assistant at a company, went back to university to finish my degree." He also admits the following: "I even tried to mend things with my wife, but we realized we weren't compatible. Now I have a child, another one with her too, because as a

result of us trying to rekindle our relationship she got pregnant again." Paradoxically, Hassan was arrested the following year, accused of being involved in a terrorist group, a charge for which he was later convicted.

His affiliations with the Salafist group and later with the jihadist supporters constituted for Hassan a painful experience –"I've lost my children, I've lost my life, my education... so many things." Hassan takes personal responsibility for what has happened to him. "I feel guilty, I shouldn't have let myself be deceived". He has now decided that, once he serves his prison sentence and is released, he will participate in initiatives aimed at preventing the processes of radicalization and recruitment promoted by the activities and propaganda of entities with these mutually related ideologies:

> I can't change the past, but I am the master of my future, and right now I feel completely free to have the opinions I want, and I don't have someone behind me telling me what to think or using me like they did. What I want is to contribute to civil society in putting an end to this. If the Islamic Cultural Center of Madrid, a Salafist cover, is not shut down, if Salafism isn't eliminated, if their books aren't banned, if that's not prosecuted, we are nothing here. And that's what I'm going to preach. I'm going to preach about what that sect is. It's part of my redemption. What I want is to help others not fall into the same trap I fell into.

In prison, Hassan maintained from the beginning a "collaborative attitude", according to prison authorities (Gobierno de España, Ministerio del Interior, Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2017b). He participated in an intervention program against violent radicalization, but he did so in order to learn about that program and send those prison authorities a series of recommendations to improve it, which he did in 2017 (Ministry of the Interior, Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2017b). Moreover, after the jihadist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils in August of that year, he sent to the management of the prison where he was incarcerated a letter in which he expressed his repulsion (Ministry of the Interior, Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2017b).

Second Case Study: OMAR

Omar was born in 1980 in Ceuta, the city where he lived until his arrest in 2013 at the age of 33. He holds the Spanish citizenship. His father was also born in Ceuta and is descended from Moroccan immigrants. His mother was born in Morocco but grew up in Ceuta, where she arrived at the age of three, accompanied by her Moroccan father. Therefore, Omar also belongs to third-generation. Both his father and mother have Arabic ethnic origin, common among the residents of Ceuta with Moroccan roots. Omar's native language is Arabic. His father left his mother when Omar was two years old, and he was raised by his grandmother until he became a school age child.

His mother's job, which involved working as a domestic cleaner in precarious labor and economic conditions, is indicative of the low social stratum the family belonged to. Both Omar's mother and his grandmother lived in the same neighbourhood in Ceuta, known as the Barrio del Príncipe Alfonso, comparable to the La Cañada de Hidum neighborhood in Melilla, where Salafists in general and Salafi-Jihadists in particular have found, over the last two or three decades, a somewhat permissive environment (Jordán & Trujillo, 2016; De la Corte, 2015). This neighborhood was also where Omar's circle of close friends resided:

> Friends from El Príncipe, boys, and girls, we were all from El Príncipe. There, there are more Muslims, the little moors. We are Spanish, but Arabs. I am of Muslim religion, but Spanish. I consider myself Spanish because I am Spanish. But in El Príncipe, let's say, the Christians who speak nothing but Spanish, they don't live with us.

Instead of attending an official primary school during his childhood, Omar attended private classes of Arabic that were offered in the neighborhood, which included a daily hour of mathematics, also taught in Arabic. It was only at around the age of 12 when he was formally enrolled in a credited school but placed in a class with students who were two or three years younger than him. At the age of 16, he dropped out of school without completing his secondary education. Following this decision, then began working without a contract in a family-owned business in a Melilla market, and later, as a salaried labor worker in the

construction sector. Subsequently, until his arrest, he had a permanent work in property cleaning.

In the meantime, during his adolescence he describes himself as “a bit of a street guy”. This description included, first, the admission that he abused of substances like cannabis, pills, and LSD doses –of the kind which was commonly known then in Spain as “tripis”—; Second, that he also took part in recurring episodes of petty crime, always in the company of two or three close friends; Finally, the avowal of his compulsive promiscuity, because during that time, Omar had a lot of sexual relationships with different women, even simultaneously:

> I had girlfriends… I had Spanish girlfriends. There was even one who was 15 years older than me, or maybe 20 years, and she had two kids. She fell in love with me, and I was with her for a while. I also dated another, and another, and another...

"I didn't have a beard, I started growing a beard"

Omar was in his late adolescence when he began to question the lifestyle he was leading, which he described in his own words as "this path of alleys, of bad company."

> 'I can't continue like this in life,' 'this won't lead me anywhere.' 'If I keep going on like this, I won't be... or I'll be killed...' because in El Príncipe, there are many weapons, a lot of conflict, and the police doesn’t enter there... There's no police presence, no authority. It’s a lawless neighborhood.

Initially, Omar started to redirect his lifestyle thanks to a formal job he was able to secure when he was 18 as a construction laborer. Thanks to this job he limited his narcotics consumption to cannabis, distanced himself from petty crime, and aimed to surround himself with the considered right friends in order to "settle down.”:

> I started working, got into construction, began to save money, and started giving up... I would only smoke joints. I decided to quit clubbing, pills, and all that nonsense. I chose friends who were more like me. If I hang out with you, don't tell

> me: ‘Let’s go steal...', ‘I've already left that path, brother’. It's over... I had normal friends, some of them were married...

His life began to revolve around his job and the relationships that satisfied him in his everyday environment: “work, the neighborhood, and that's it”, as he describes it. However, for about three more years, he maintained the already mentioned promiscuous behavior in his frequent relationships with different women. He put an end to this behavior when he added marriage to work and the neighborhood, saying, “I gave up all that stuff. It's just me and my wife now. We got married, and in 2003, our first daughter was born.”

Around that time, Omar leaned towards completing his personal transformation through a religious search, strongly introducing religion into his life, which had hardly been present until then, not even in his childhood –“I didn't pray as a child”–, despite the Muslim tradition of his ancestors and the Islamic culture predominant in his environment. He explains how he channeled that religious search in the following way:

> Through television, television… A bit from television, another bit from the mosque. Also, on the internet. The imam is the one who speaks to you, so I started listening. And television, I watched television. I have a satellite dish. I pick up channels from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt. I pick up Arabic channels, and there you find the wise ones. The wise ones talk about religion, and I started a little here, a little there, a little everywhere... And I saw that it relaxes you and keeps you away from many things. You don't have to take drugs, you don't steal, none of that... That's the path of truth. It's the path to happiness and tranquility.

This is how he began to live as a devout Muslim. However, in his adoption of religion, Omar diverged from the official Sunni *Malaki* and *Asha’ari* approaches predominant in Morocco. He used some circumlocutions to avoid being very explicit about it and emphasized the religious “wise ones”. He said, "I don't know how to explain it. Morocco is different, but the wise ones are the same. A wise person who understands religion, whether from Morocco, Tunisia, or Saudi Arabia... they are the same. And they talk to you about arguments. They teach you to live a straight and righteous life." In practice, Omar embraced both the religion and a fundamentalist understanding of Islam simultaneously:

> I started praying at the mosque. I didn't pray before, and I started praying at the mosque. I started growing a beard. I wore the jilbab... I always dressed like that; it's called a tunic. Yes, the jilbab. I didn't have a beard, I started growing a beard. That's because the Prophet wore that attire; the Prophet had a beard. See the Prophet? Well, he grew a beard. The Prophet wore a chilaba, not jeans... I started this in 2004. When they caught me, I had a beard that I hadn't touched for four or five years.

It is also noteworthy that during the interview Omar wanted to explain that Islam teaches to respect your neighbours, and he shared with the interviewers the following story:

> The Prophet had a neighbour who was Jewish, and you know what he used to do? He would throw his garbage on the Prophet's doorstep. And the Prophet would come out and clean it. Another day, and another... another... another day... He bothered him. It didn't bother the Prophet, but the Jew bothered the Prophet. Instead of sweeping and collecting and disposing the trash, he would throw it on his doorstep. Until one day, the Prophet was amazed, he went out and saw that he wasn't being bothered anymore. And he asked about him, 'The neighbor is sick, he can't even leave his house,' and he went in to visit him. And the Jew was amazed, he said: 'Look, all these years bothering him, and now that I'm sick, he comes in to visit me.' And they say he converted to Islam.

Interestingly, this denotes that Omar has a limited knowledge of the Islamic scriptures, since the story is widely considered part of a fabricated hadith –being hadith an account of what the Prophet Muhammad said or did, or of his tacit approval of something said or done in his presence—, a false narration with no roots in the authoritative Islamic sources, which mainstream Islamic jurisprudence even prohibits mentioning unless its forged nature is clarified. Anyway, Omar had transitioned from "work, the neighborhood, and that's it" to "I embraced my religion, my children, my work... and that's it."

"What happened then, happened in the context of Syria"

Omar's transition from fundamentalism to jihadism took place in a precise context. In his own words: "what happened then, happened in the context of Syria." Referring to his

jihadist engagement. That is to say, the context was that of the anti-government uprisings that began in 2011 in various Arab countries and, in the case of Syria, evolved into civil war (Lynch, Freelon & Aday, 2014). More specifically, it was within the backdrop of the full-fledged civil war unleashed in Syria by 2012:

> So, in 2011, what happened, happened. The Arab Spring or something like that, that started in Syria, in Egypt… People who didn't want presidents who were dictators... rose against them. The Arab Spring. Egypt rose up, Tunisia rose up, Syria, Iraq... Some presidents stepped down, but Bashar al-Assad, the one in Syria, said no. 'What do you want? War? Well, war it is.' Civil war. He used his planes, soldiers, and troops against rebels, his own people, Syrians who didn't want him. So, the war began.

Against this background, Omar's circle of close friends in the Príncipe Alfonso neighborhood integrated a group or cell in Ceuta which had close connections with a jihadist network established in a nearby Moroccan town, Fnideq. The mobilization of the Ceuta cell benefitted from the assistance of notorious Moroccan Salafí clerics, such as Omar Haddouchi. He visited Ceuta in June 2012 to lead prayers in a mosque on the very day when the death of one of the city's first young Muslims, who carried out a suicide attack in Syria, was announced.[8] Haddouchi praised him as a martyr and voiced religious legitimization for other young people from Ceuta who had gone to Syria to wage jihad or were preparing to do so.

Thus, the jihadist mobilization promoted from Syria had an impact on fundamentalist circles in Ceuta, some of which were already influenced by militant Salafism. The above-mentioned cell was established there to carry out activities related to the Syrian conflict. Between 2012, the year this jihadist cell was created, and its dismantling well into 2013, its main members were primarily engaged in recruiting young Muslims from the city, training them, and sending them to Syria. Initially, they joined the Al-Nusrah Front and, following its

[8] Concerning Haddouchi, see his interview with Pargeter (2008). He was arrested in Morocco, alongside other radical sheikhs, after the 2003 Casablanca attacks as one of the main instigators of the extremist Salafi ideology and receive a very long prison sentence. Haddouchi was in Ceuta in June 2012 because some months earlier the then King Mohammed VI granted him a Royal pardon.

emergence, the ISIS. Omar became part of this cell because its members belonged to his network of friendship, kinship, and neighbour bonds.

The young Muslims who traveled from Ceuta to different locations in Syria or who were being prepared to do so, just like the core activists of that cell, were born in the city and held the Spanish nationality. Moreover, as deduced from Omar's ties with them, they were characterized by residing in the Príncipe Alfonso neighborhood. Among them were several grandchildren of Moroccan immigrants, as was Omar's case, who maintained a tight-knit network of interpersonal relationships based affective connections. This is reflected in Omar's comment:

> People started to go to Syria. People from Ceuta, people from my neighborhood, people from my childhood, people I've played football with, gone fishing with, stolen motorcycles with when we were kids… So, one day they go to sleep, and the next day, they catch a flight to Málaga, then to Syria. Some of my friends, some were my friends. More than four or five have died. They started going voluntarily... one chooses… one says: 'I'm going to help the people.'

Like the friends he refers to, Omar was involved in the radicalization and recruitment of young Muslims. He was involved in their preparation for travel. He facilitated and monitored the journeys and communicated between the jihadists in Syria and the cell in Ceuta. This can be inferred from the material that was seized during his arrest, including electronic devices, surveillance operations, call logs, phone conversations, and recorded videos. All of this was obtained under judicial oversight and accredited in court documents encompassing ratified police reports and depositions in criminal proceedings (Audiencia Nacional, Juzgado Central de Instrucción no. 2, 2014). This remark is relevant since, triangulating data after the interview with Omar, it turned out that he misconstrued well proved facts.

He participated in radicalization meetings held in Ceuta but also across the border in Fnideq. Furthermore, he was highly active on Facebook through the use of a profile to conceal his real identity, frequently making references to the jihad in Syria and sharing pages of jihadist content. But he refers to that in rather wary words:

> I followed the war on Facebook. If there was a video showing civilians being killed, I would make a comment or something. I was very, very, very active there... I watched videos from Syria, made comments... So, in that video, I would leave a comment, and people who followed me would click 'like', 'like', 'like', 'like...' I made comments, commented on videos. I shared videos.'

Additionally, Omar was involved in physical training activities for candidates preparing to go to Syria, which strengthened their bonds with each other and with the cell as a whole. These activities were often given the appearance of informal gatherings on a beach in Ceuta and soccer matches.

The phone communication that Omar had with contacts in Turkey –as a transit country– and Syria –the destination country– was very frequent. Omar acknowledges only incoming calls and, despite the explicit contents of the conversations he had, he justifies these communications in this way:

> Back then they had my phone number and started calling me from Syria. But I wouldn't hang up on my friend. He would ask about his children because some of them leave their child behind. He'd say, 'Hey, Omar, how are you?' I'd reply, 'How are we?' 'So-and-so... passed away.' He'd call and ask, 'Omar, what are they saying about me in the neighborhood?' I'd tell him, 'You know, it's the Príncipe, everyone talks. 'On the bus, they talk about you; at the café, they talk about you; at the store, they talk about you.' Everyone was talking about him.

Quite probably, Omar was considering going to Syria at the time of his arrest. He was being urged to do so by friends who had already moved to that country as foreign fighters. But he claims he didn't entertain that option due to his family circumstances.

> 'Hey, come to Syria,' 'What do you mean, 'Syria'? I have four kids, and I just had a baby girl. Syria is right here in my house.' I mean... my wife and I, four kids, that's six mouths to feed. I have to get up at seven in the morning to go to work, and I'd say, 'Syria is right here in my house.' How am I going to go to Syria? Leaving behind four kids, a wife... my mother is sick... and leave my roots here to go to Syria, to die there! Because if you go there, you're going to die. Anyone who goes there, goes to die.

However, Omar's own wife became anxious at the possibility of her husband going to Syria, especially after receiving cash to pay off all their debts, money that was found hidden during a search of the family home. Omar had also started telling her that he was going to go to Syria to exercise jihad, although, according to her, he would add that he was "just joking." (Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Segunda, 2015, 326). In this respect, Omar cautiously approaches an explanation of why his friends were going to Syria:

> They say they're going to help the people, and if you die in that fight, you go straight to glory, and then they say you have virgins. Glory, glory... they also call it a garden, right? What did they get? Glory directly. Living in glory, living in luxury, everything you love there. Glory, instead of hell. Those who believe. Those who believe, think there's hell, thinks there's glory... But they're going to help the people, against the president and his army.

"These ten years have hurt me"

Omar ended his jihadist engagement forcibly when he was arrested in mid-2013. Later, he was sentenced to ten years in prison as an active member of a terrorist group, along with nine other members of the same cell, all of whom were neighbors and friends of Omar, some even relatives.

After four to five years of Omar's incarceration in a state penitentiary, one of those neighbors and friends, who held a leadership role in the Melilla cell, managed to send him various letters, just as he did to other inmates who were mostly former members of that same small group. These letters reached their recipients through clandestine channels, bypassing the strict isolation and constant surveillance of the penitentiary regime to which these prisoners are subjected due to their special status.

These letters appealed to the idea that the experience of imprisonment should not mark the end of their jihadist engagement but rather only a pause. They were missives that often featured the Islamic State flag and commonly included its caliphate's slogan "lasting and expanding" (*baquiyah wa tatamaddad)*. However, all those letters eventually detected by the prison authorities were written between 2015 and 2018, that is before the disappearance in 2019 of the caliphate proclaimed by ISIS in June 2014 over vast territories in Syria and Iraq.

There is no record of Omar responding to any of the five letters he received during 2017 and 2018. Furthermore, it appears that the sender of these letters gave priority to five other former members of the dismantled cell in Ceuta who were serving prison sentences, as they received them earlier, in 2015 and 2016. It is not easy to interpret whether this timing is related to the greater or lesser willingness of the prisoners to leave their jihadist involvement behind. However, Omar became particularly affected by the long prison sentence he was serving:

> These ten years have hurt me. They've honestly really hurt me. A little girl... I left her when she was one year old, and now I come out, and she is 10 years old. The girl I left at 10, I'm going to find her at 20. The boy at 8, he'll be 18. The other one at 6, well, she'll be 16. They've honestly hurt me. They've hurt me.

Faced with these imprisonment consequences, the likelihood of disengagement facilitated a display of remorse on Omar's part, although he was somewhat confused and induced by a psychologist who looked after him in one of the penitentiary centers where he has been incarcerated:

> The psychologist tells me: 'Write a letter to Madrid, ask for forgiveness, apologies...' I tell him, 'Look, first, I apologize for this, for what happened on the internet, for the calls, I ask for forgiveness, although... I should only ask for forgiveness if I've shed blood, but I haven't shed blood. There are no family members, I don't have to apologize to anyone. But still, I ask for forgiveness, I apologize... I repent, although I shouldn't.' But I ask for forgiveness. I regret it. I have repented; I wrote a letter to Madrid expressing my remorse. 'I won't do that again.' It's been ten years... I'm missing my children's childhood; my wife is suffering out there.

On the other hand, when the interview took place, Omar was already using his time in prison to improve his education and obtain a secondary school diploma, an effort which also earned him penitentiary benefits in the form of intimate visits:

> Every three months they give you 36 points for studying. So, you have the right to a family or an intimate visit. I want to get my high school diploma, which I don't

> have. I'm working on it. I'm with the teacher to... he's preparing me to start taking exams. Completing one subject, I have four subjects... Before, he used to come only once a week, but now it's three times. He comes on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And I spend an hour and a half with him here.

Furthermore, Omar says he has job-related plans for when he is released from prison once he has completed his sentence.

> I have many plans. Many plans. First, I'm going to get my C driver's license. I already have the A and the B. I have the A for all the motorcycles... I have the B for the car... and I have a cousin who is an entrepreneur, he has four, five, or six trucks.

He also speaks about priorities for when he is excarcerated, such as taking advantage of the unemployment benefit for released prisoners offered by the Spanish government through the Ministry of Labor and Social Economy.[9] After meeting certain requirements, it could be received for six months, extendable up to a maximum of 18 months. He also plans to readjust to family life:

> I'm just going to first get the assistance. I'm going to fix my teeth. Enjoy my family first. I'm going to go out a lot to clear my head and get rid of this paranoia. With my wife, my family, I'll enjoy time with them...

It took Omar some time to make the personal decision to disengage. Two years after entering prison he was still radicalized, although the jihadist group of friends, relatives, and neighbors of the Ceuta neighborhood of El Príncipe to which he had belonged and whose members were also imprisoned –except for those who died fighting in Syria— was by then internally divided and very weakened by lack of cohesion among its members (Gobierno de España, Ministerio del Interior, Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2015). Omar's network was dismantled. But it was not until a year later when, as a behavioral

[9] This temporary unemployment benefit for individuals released from prison, nationals or foreigners, amounted to 480 euros per month in 2023 (Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal, 2023).

change derived from his disengagement, he voluntarily requested to participate in a violent radicalization intervention program aimed at jihadist prisoners, expressing the desire to get closer to his family and to pursue secondary education (Gobierno de España, Ministerio del Interior, Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2017a).

Discussion and Conclusion

Academics from different disciplines have long debated whether entry and exit processes are interrelated, and if so, in what manner. Within terrorism studies, the correlation between radicalization and disengagement has also been raised, although research specifically addressing this within the push and pull framework has been limited thus far. Disengagement, like prior radicalization, are seldom instigated by a single factor. But two case studies, featuring third-generation Muslim men involved in jihadist activities in Spain, allow us to support consistency between the dimensions that contributed to violent radicalization and the factors observed when disengaging from terrorism, in conditions where motivations and needs remained stable between entry and exit. Although not a novel outcome on its own, this finding provides an opportunity to further understand how the frustration of initial motivations in radicalization can significantly contribute to driving individuals away from violent extremism.

Hassan, a young resident of Melilla, followed a path towards jihadism after embracing Salafism, looking for an interpretative framework of reality that would resolve his doubts and concerns. Ideology played a prevalent role in his integration into a jihadist cell, while disillusionment with that same ideology, fostered by exposure to alternative sources of knowledge and personal intellectual evolution, became crucial in his disengagement. As it consistently failed to satisfy Hassan's intellectual questions, his dedication to and affiliation with the radical group waned. Additionally, conforming to the interpretation of Islam by the jihadist cell and meeting the demands of commitment to it entailed costs, such as isolation from relatives and friends, and the adoption of unfulfilling routines. These events, prominent in Hassan's personal narrative, served as additional push factors in the disengagement process.

Omar, a young resident of Ceuta, embarked on his journey towards jihadism, also through Islamic fundamentalism, influenced by a network of close associates. The weakening

of this network ties played a pivotal role in triggering his disengagement. Preexisting ties with friends, relatives, and neighbors, many of whom traveled to Syria, intensified Omar's prior religious awakening and led him into jihadism. Thus, he joined a jihadist cell emulating those in his immediate social circle. However, the loss in Syria of several network members, added to the imprisonment of the others as a result of the same police operation in which Omar's was arrested, brought about the network demise. If integration into this social environment had initially provided Omar with a sense of belonging and purpose, allowing him to distance himself from his turbulent past, his separation triggered his terrorist disengagement.

The contrasting accounts of Hassan and Omar provide a glimpse of consistency between the predominant factor driving their terrorist disengagement and the prevalent dimension which fueled their prior radicalization. But they are also congruent with the notion that disengagement is a dynamic and complex process. In addition to the predominant factors, other push and pull factors were present in the trajectory that led both of them to exit jihadist terrorism. In the case of Hassan, aside from ideological letdown, push factors such as disillusionment with group members and routines, and inability to cope with violence, as well as pull factors like educational demands and family desires, can be observed. In the case of Omar, apart from the degradation of the network he relayed on, unmet expectations and burnout due to long imprisonment, these push factors seemingly combined with employment opportunities and family desires as pull factors. Likewise, factors other than, respectively, ideology and network –for example, enabling and permissive environments (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, 968-970)— were present, as less determinant, in the radicalization of the two third-generation young men.

This study's attempt to substantiate the interplay between entry and exit encounters some methodological limitations. The personal narratives elicited through semi-structured interviews are potentially affected by various biases, including ex-post rationalizations, omissions in memory, and social desirability. Consequently, interviews present a challenge in terms of reliability and validity that must be acknowledged. To address these potential shortcomings, we have triangulated the information with documentary sources, and have identified those inconsistencies in the discourse, assessing the extent to which they affect our study. As this is a qualitative study with a small sample size, the usefulness of this paper is

more focused on theory building than theory testing. Studies with larger sample sizes will enable the thorough validation of the proposed thesis, providing valuable insights for the design of rehabilitation programs highly customized to each individual, and aligned with the predominant dimension observed in their past experience of violent radicalization.

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