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Everyday Prevention of Radicalization: The Impacts of Family, Peer, and Police Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This study examines early intervention against individual radicalization. The data originate from interviews with young Muslims in Norway who had experienced interventions related to their own radicalization, or engaged in or witnessed interventions directed at a radicalized peer or relative. We find that informal interventions by family and friends were most prevalent in the data and played the most decisive role in interrupting radicalization, while police interventions were less common and had mixed results. Interventions by family or peers often came early in the radicalization process, were employed by trusted “insiders”, and took place as part of everyday life, thus having less detrimental consequences for radicalized individuals. We finally discuss the challenges of combining interventions by family members and friends with involvements from the police and security service.

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Introduction

Since the mid-2000s, domestic radicalization has become a primary concern for European governments and security services, often centered on the fear of “homegrown” violent jihadists.¹ Contemporary research on radicalization tends to focus on individuals who have already committed political violence and terrorism.² A search of the three leading terrorism journals for example,³ finds 1,466 articles on radicalization, but yields only 227 results on deradicalization. This is indicative of the mismatch in scholarly interest, despite notable efforts in recent years, that have seen a journal and numerous publications focusing exclusively on deradicalization.⁴ Moreover, the number of people having radicalized but opted out before engaging in serious crime or violence is much larger than of those who ended up committing violence or being identified while planning to do so.⁵ The broken radicalization path of individuals in the former group still remains relatively little studied.

After the civil war in Syria erupted in 2011, the concern over radicalization of Muslims escalated dramatically in Europe.⁶ The war in Syria was a transformative event that mobilized Muslims globally, but only a minority radicalized to the point of actually leaving for Syria and taking part in extreme violent acts and terrorism.⁷ About 5,000 European Muslims traveled to Syria and Iraq to engage in the conflict, among

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them 100 Norwegians,⁸ while a much larger number considered doing so. As the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (IS/ISIL) launched armed insurgency in Syria, they initially attracted wide support among young Muslims across the world. However, as time passed, their support fell dramatically, following news reports of their atrocities and their eventual failure to maintain territorial control.

This study attends to the early interventions by family, friends, and the police intended to interrupt radicalization processes in the wake of the Syrian conflict. Our exploratory analysis is based on qualitative interviews with twenty-six young Muslims in Norway who themselves—or whose family members or close peers—considered traveling to Syria, supported IS, or were involved in an extremist milieu, but subsequently decided to abandon extremist organizations and beliefs. Family, peer, and police-initiated interventions stood out clearly as the main actions taken to interrupt radicalization, and we investigate their impact and role. We also discuss the ramifications of combining interventions by family members and friends with those of the police and security service.

The Role of Family and Peers in Deradicalization

Extremism and the related notion of extremists are often assumed to involve criminal acts (violence, hate speech etc.).⁹ The line between criminal and non-criminal acts however, is fluid and under constant negotiation in most legal contexts.¹⁰ We thus adopt a wider understanding, including as extremists those participants who actively supported terrorist acts and organizations. Radicalization is a process that involves a growing acceptance of the use of violence to achieve political or ideological goals.¹¹ The literature distinguishes between extremist beliefs (cognitive radicalization) and extremist behavior (behavioral radicalization),¹² as well as between violent and non-violent radicalization.¹³ Most research focuses on physical and violent expressions of radicalization.¹⁴ However, in everyday usage, the term is linked to both extreme ideas and extremist behavior such as political violence or terrorism.¹⁵

Leaving a radicalizing environment is not a straightforward process.¹⁶ Many people opt out of or halt their radicalization processes,¹⁷ but there is little detailed knowledge of how these processes are interrupted and what role early intervention plays.¹⁸ Research on counter-radicalization tends to focus on the exit strategies of individuals who have already engaged in violent extremism,¹⁹ often through top-down, formal, and organized efforts.²⁰ The emphasis thus tends to be on reactive forms of targeted intervention. Scholars have examined the role of various socio-psychological processes through which people leave terrorism and violent extremist milieus²¹. Less attention has been given to dynamic processes, often involving family and friends, that interrupt individuals' entrance into or engagement in extremist milieus.²²

Contemporary terrorism research describes the role of perpetrators' families and social networks in radicalization and how family members contribute to radicalization.²³ Scholars have investigated the role of families and peers in what Hafez terms "kinship radicalization,"²⁴ and both kinship and friendship have been described as factors for recruitment to violent extremism²⁵ that sometimes "prevail over other environmental or more macro factors such as social marginalization."²⁶ This literature noticeably

outweighs the works on the positive roles family and parents may play in efforts aimed at interruption of radicalization, deradicalization or disengagement.²⁷

Family members and peers have been described as important resources or partners in early interventions in the deradicalization literature.²⁸ They may for example support interventions by police and other representatives of the state, or assist them in identifying early signs of radicalization, vulnerabilities, or needs.²⁹ Family and peers are also important in deradicalization in their own right, without the involvement of state agencies or public professionals. Sometimes deradicalization efforts may even be more effective when representatives of law enforcement and state agencies remain uninvolved.³⁰

Family and Parents

Policies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism have increasingly emphasized working closely with the families of radicalized individuals.³¹ Germany pioneered family support as part of their strategy against radicalization,³² and there are several other examples of government programs where police engage with the parents of potential terrorists.³³ Involving families is also highlighted in recent governmental action plans to prevent radicalization and violent extremism in the Nordic countries. While police officers in Norway have emphasized the importance of engaging with family in their preventive work, actual engagement was still unusual because of what officers describe as a lack of access.³⁴

Radicalization and terrorism scholars similarly emphasize the role of families for efforts to deradicalize or disengage from violent extremism.³⁵ Positive ties with non-radicalized family members may for example influence radicals to rethink their beliefs,³⁶ and jihadists that have left a terrorist group often re-connect with their families.³⁷ Members of extremists groups also find it harder to leave radical groups if they have lost contact with their family,³⁸ and extremists who maintained links to non-radicalized family members (or friends) were more likely to opt out of radicalization than those who cut their ties completely.³⁹ One study also revealed that while former extremists did not think that their parents triggered their deradicalization process, they still emphasized that parents played an essential supportive role when this process first started.⁴⁰

Family members may function as a valuable link between an official exit program and the potential exiter,⁴¹ and parents play a key role in establishing parental or family-based community support networks that might assist persons wishing to leave an extremist milieu.⁴² Supportive family members also play important emotional, social, and material roles when an individual disengages from an extremist milieu.⁴³ However, the majority of research and policy on the role of the family has concerned their engagement with state agencies and professionals, and only rarely have considered the independent role that families may play in deradicalization before people engage in violent extremism.

A few studies have found that parents were unaware of their children's radicalization and therefore were of little help for the early interventions of state agencies and professionals.⁴⁴ The role of the family and parents thus depends on a number of factors

such as the socio-geographic context, the parent-child relation, and the severity and type of radicalization (e.g. left-wing, right-wing, or Islamist).⁴⁵ Criminological research also makes clear that when children become adolescents, particularly during their teen phase, their peers become increasingly important in potential criminal careers.⁴⁶ Arguably, in this life phase when family members have decreased oversight and authority over adolescents, their peers play a more important role in early interventions against radicalization.

Peers and Friends

Attention to the role of peers and friends in the early prevention of radicalization and violent extremism is relatively new.⁴⁷ Government agencies and policies seem to favor parents as potential partners in interventions, probably because they have formal responsibilities (when the target of interventions is under-aged), are perceived to be more reliable than young peers, and possibly are easier to motivate to take active part in state-initiated interventions. One notable exception is the Swedish “Tolerance Project,” which builds on the assumption that peers can play a key role in preventing extremism.⁴⁸ In the last decade, governments across the globe have increasingly shifted from broad-based CVE interventions toward individual-specific approaches.⁴⁹ In these measures, the family and (sometimes) peers are described as key partners in interventions initiated by state agencies or non-governmental actors.

Similarly, while the empirical evidence and scholarship on the role of family in early prevention of radicalization is still scant and emphasizes their role as partners of police and public agencies, the number of studies on the role of peers and friends in early deradicalization is even smaller. In studies of disengagement from terrorism, interaction with moderate peers and the desire to live a normal life have been highlighted as important pull factors.⁵⁰ Close friends (and siblings) have been shown to act as “associate gatekeepers” in prevention and could be critical for its success.⁵¹ These studies, however, mainly concern people who are already radicalized and heavily involved in violent extremist milieus.

Our study shows that friends also play an important role in providing alternative religious ideals and authorities independent of state involvement. For example, when asked about the most important deradicalization agents, Muslim youths in Norway emphasize the key role of peers (and family) in preventing radicalization into violent extremism.⁵² Muslim communities have been a primary target of measures to prevent radicalization and violent extremism,⁵³ but these communities and especially Muslim peers of radicalized individuals exert their own important resistance to religious extremism as well. This includes interventions, which is the topic of this study, but also the employment of widespread religious counter-narratives to jihadism to fend off jihadist propaganda.⁵⁴

A Relational and “Everyday” Approach to Deradicalization

We adopt a relational approach in this study,⁵⁵ whereby we expand attention beyond the characteristics of the radicalized individual and emphasize the person’s interaction with other persons and professional actors. Scholars employing a relational approach

have understood radicalization as emerging from a complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors.⁵⁶ We do for example attend to the influence of state interventions aimed at preventing and countering radicalization. This expansion of attention is in line with the main tenets of a relational approach, which emphasize the importance of positioning the actors we study in “the wider ecology” that they inhabit.⁵⁷ We highlight the importance of attending to the various influences of state intervention on the development of radicalization trajectories, because the research on counter-radicalization has shown the outcomes of such interventions to be ambiguous and uncertain.⁵⁸

Our emphasis on the importance of family and peers further expands this relational approach toward what has been conceptualized as studies of everyday life.⁵⁹ This perspective is influenced by different traditions such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and conversation analysis, but shares an emphasis on studying the informal, commonplace, and repetitive aspects of social life. While sometimes regarded as banal and mundane by those interested in the more dramatic, formalized, or otherwise extraordinary aspects of the topic (such as state counterterrorism interventions), everyday-life scholars insist on the importance of repeated social interactions in any social phenomena: “Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities (...) it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground.”⁶⁰ In this study we will demonstrate how the everyday should be central to an understanding of deradicalization.

While our data do not permit a comprehensive mapping of our participants’ social ecology and network, or everyday life, we do explore the role of social bonds and everyday interactions in the interruption of radicalization, especially the role of family and peers. Our study is thus oriented toward the relational and everyday aspects of radicalization, emphasizing that social relations and repeated interactions are decisive for individual radicalization and its interruption.⁶¹ It contributes to the literature on early intervention against radicalization by providing important insights and an opportunity to learn from the informal civilian interventions that happen primarily outside of, and before, the involvement of state agencies. We particularly attend to the independent role of family and peers in the early interruption of radicalization processes, but also examine the impacts of formal interventions by the police and security services.

Data and Methods

Our data includes in-depth interviews with 26 young Muslims (18–30 years) in Norway: 7 persons who experienced interventions in their own radicalization, and 19 bystanders who engaged in or witnessed interventions toward radicalized individuals close to them. These two groups of interviewees were recruited as part of a larger research project on young Muslims in Norway, that had 90 participants.⁶² Participants for the present study were selected from the general sample because they had detailed first-hand experience of deradicalization and early interventions against radicalization.

Most bystanders were recruited through a snowball sampling technique in the researchers’ social networks and referral by university students, by contacting mosques and Muslim youth organizations, and by going to Muslim events. The aim in this part of the recruitment was to identify mainstream Muslim youths. The former extremists

were recruited selectively based on their former affiliation with extreme milieus and networks through a purposeful sampling strategy.⁶³

Following our understanding of extremism and radicalization described above, the individuals we refer to as radicalized, or in the process of being radicalized, actively supported terrorist acts and organizations. They were sometimes deemed that way by the participants themselves or by the authors on the basis of their former wish to become a foreign fighter, support for ISIS (for example vocal or financial), or other forms of engagement in extremist organizations. What they had done may or may not have been covered by criminal law at the time it was committed, and their extremist engagement seldom became a matter for the criminal system.

The interviews were conducted in 2017, lasted between one and two hours, and were conducted in cafés or participants' homes. A team of five researchers, three women and two men, from different backgrounds and with different religious beliefs (including Muslims), carried out the interviews. Recruitment through social networks and organizations in which participants had faith helped build trust. A trusting relationship may also have been facilitated by interviewers being almost the same age as the interviewees and, in many cases, sharing ethnic or religious beliefs or backgrounds, or minority experiences.

Since knowledge of violent extremism and extremist individuals is highly sensitive, and arguably especially so for jihadism, participants might not have reported all relevant cases and experiences. There might also be a bias against the police (some participants had experienced what they described as police discrimination) and a wish to defend and protect Islam and Muslims (many perceived Islam as being “under attack”). We did, however, obtain a lot of sensitive first-hand information on interventions and many spoke positively about the police and critically about other Muslims. Our impression was that such a bias, although present, was relatively weak. This might be because the trust between researchers and participants was high, the questions largely regarded successful interventions, and participants were either moderate bystanders or former extremists no longer involved in extremist milieus. Nevertheless, our data only enable us to analyze interventions as experienced by radicalized individuals and their family and friends. The data do not include perspectives from the police, teachers, or social workers, for example, which could have provided different perspectives.

The study has been assessed and approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data. Its guidelines for obtaining informed consent and for protecting participants' privacy were followed, and the names we use for participants are pseudonyms. The overall study we draw from was designed to capture everyday religious Muslim beliefs and views and knowledge of radical Salafi-oriented groups and Muslim foreign fighters.⁶⁴ In this paper, we analyze in detail the parts where participants describe experiences of preventive measures against radicalization and violent extremism and their impact on the targeted persons. Our initial interest, reflected in the questions asked during interviews, was in experience of any type of informal or formal intervention by state, private or civil society actors.

The parts of the transcribed interviews that describe interventions were identified and coded using NVivo software, following the principle of inductive thematic analysis.⁶⁵ In line with the aim of the study, we then began creating and revising codes

(themes) during the process of seeking to establish what forms of interventions they had experienced and their impact. While a few other types of interventions by religious organizations and municipal agencies were mentioned, the coding process showed clearly that certain forms of intervention were most prevalent in the data: that by family and parents, peers and friends, as well as the police and security service. This threefold division was used as a guide for presenting findings in the analysis.

Forms of Intervention in Radicalization Processes

We distinguish between three different forms of early interventions in the interrupted radicalization processes we have examined: interventions by family, interventions by friends, and interventions by police and its secret services. The two former stand out as most important in our data, while police interventions were less prevalent.

Interventions by Family

Family is crucial for primary socialization in childhood and continues to have a strong influence on behavior in adolescence and young adulthood.⁶⁶ Interventions in radicalization processes by family members are informal and happen in private arenas. In contrast to interventions by law enforcement or other state agencies, these interventions build on and use a relationship of trust and care as an entry-point to influence potential extremists out of radicalization processes. In this study, such interventions most often took the form of a “serious talk” or continuous smaller engagements, but families also imposed restrictions on who young people were allowed to meet, or set constraints in terms of duties and responsibilities.

Bashar talked about wanting to travel to Syria. He said, “It was last year. I couldn’t just sit here. You see 6–7 people who rape a girl, cut her up and torture her (...) I got mad, someone had to stop that, and I couldn’t go to the politicians. If I had travelled I would have been fighting for something.” When the interviewer asks why he did not go, he replied shortly, “My mom said she needed me here.” His story exemplifies why many young Muslims considered engaging in political violence and extremism, as well as why many of them did not. They were enraged by violence against Muslims, injustices, geopolitical issues, and what they perceived to be a war against Islam, but an intervention by close family members stopped them from acting on these feelings. Gradually the anger softened and they matured out of considering the most drastic actions, although they still might have some of the same political and religious beliefs. Strong family bonds are decisive for interrupting further radicalization and can inspire disengagement from an extremist milieu.⁶⁷

In her early 20s, Sarah had been drawn toward extremist groups. She joined with a friend and described how the meetings they attended usually started “nice and friendly” with “talk about the Prophets,” but then gradually the rhetoric became more aggressive. Sarah emphasized the role of her mother in her interrupted radicalization process:

I am grateful for having a mother that has a lot of knowledge. She has kept me on the right path. I’m pretty sure I could have ended up the same way (as her extreme friend), if I didn’t have a steady home and some rules. My mother has kept an eye on me. (...)

It was this one day when I bought an *abaya* (long black robe), and tried it in front of the mirror. She came bursting into the room and said, “What are you doing?”

Using an *abaya* is not a sign of extremism in itself, but her mother put together several developments in Sarah’s life and was worried about the way things were going. When her mother intervened, Sarah knew it came from a place of love and genuine concern for her well-being, which made the intervention particularly effective. Afrah similarly talked about someone in her family who had considered going to Syria to fight for the Islamic State (IS). She said that family intervention had been important in interrupting his radicalization process:

We told him, “You’re stupid, you can’t do that, we don’t understand you if you do that.” And then he thought “Okay, this is actually wrong, I shouldn’t do this.” (...) My aunt especially talked to him, because he listens to my aunt.

Afrah emphasized that the intervention of her aunt was particularly important, because they had a strong and trusting relationship. This indicates an important observation in these interventions. The stronger the emotional bond before the intervention, the more effective the interventions would be. The radicalized individual could trust that the intervention came from genuine care and concern and not just a need for control. Relatedly, the likeliness of engagement in criminal gangs has shown to be considerably lower for young people with strong family bonds.⁶⁸

Interventions by family did also sometimes have an element of authority, and respect for parents and other elders played an important part in interrupting radicalization. Aise talked about a friend who wanted to travel to Syria to fight for IS. She explained that what happens sometimes is that young people can “get a life lesson from their parents, just to get to know what the consequences can be.” Others described how parents intervened to prevent their children from being with friends they considered to be extreme, in order to avoid their child potentially being radicalized. Sandra talked about what she described as an “extreme” friend. She said that “my family doesn’t want me to be with her. Sometimes my dad was afraid that I would be brainwashed if I spent time with her.” Sandra ended up trying to conceal her friendship from her family, but the continuous negative reactions led her to gradually lose contact with her radicalized friend. This possibly interrupted her own radicalization process.

The influence of the family also extended into concerns that were more practical. Tariq talked about the reasons for why he had considered traveling to Syria. He wanted to fight the Assad family, said it was self-defense, and emphasized that at the time he considered going it was still legal. When deciding not to go, his concern and strong obligation for his family was decisive:

I have a family. I have a lot of responsibility, and children with special needs. After thinking about it for a long while, and speaking to Islamic scholars here in Oslo I found out that it wasn’t right to leave my family (...) My daughter has had a very turbulent childhood, I don’t know what would have happened to her if I had left and got killed.

There were many ways that family interventions, sometimes combined with responsibilities toward the family, prevented a radicalized individual’s last steps into engaging in political violence or high-risk activism. Personal obligations like marriage and having

children create and enhance social bonds that prevent further radicalization, partially because these obligations reduce the person's "biographical availability"⁶⁹ for engagement in an extremist milieu.⁷⁰

The role of the family varies from members of the family engaging with love, care, and advice to family members more authoritatively engaging and, for example, forbidding young people from meeting certain people or going to particular meetings or mosques or joining particular organizations. The influence also ranges from triggering a cognitive change to just being a restricting factor on certain behaviors for more pragmatic reasons. In short, these are informal care-based interventions that happen in private arenas and as part of everyday life. The interventions use the strong bonds of family ties to prevent further radicalization into violent extremism.

Interventions by Friends

In the same ways as with family, interventions in radicalization processes by friends are informal and happen in private arenas. Typically, the stronger bond between friends, the greater the potential for influence that interrupts radicalization.⁷¹ Lacking the authority of the parents or other elders, the influence from friends depends even more on the strength of social ties (e.g. the degree of loyalty and emotional attachment), arguments, and the perceived authenticity of care. The advantage of interventions by friends can be that young people often identify and relate more strongly to peers than to family.⁷² Criminological research has similarly shown that the existence of strong social ties with moderate peers (or family) is positively associated with disengagement and social reintegration.⁷³

Abdullah had been part of an extremist network. Many of his friends had gone to Syria, some were missing or dead, and some had returned to Norway and were imprisoned. Abdullah said this about his own interrupted radicalization process: "What influenced me the most was my friends, my brother, and other brothers from Oslo." Family and friends were sometimes placed in the same category, illustrated by Abdullah's use of "brother" and "sister" for good friends. This could also be used for acquaintances that shared certain characteristics such as religion or ethnic background. The influence friends had was through their social bonds, often by guiding the radicalized person toward particular Islamic resources or scholars.

Many bystanders to radicalization processes in this study talked about how they had either successfully or unsuccessfully tried to interrupt processes of radicalization they had witnessed in their friends. Melodi had a friend who had a lot of trouble when she grew up. When she got older, Melodi said that her friend was "curious" about Islam, but "uncritical" toward the information she got about the religion. She talked in great detail about how she had tried to intervene in her gradually intensifying process of radicalization:

I was annoyed and told her that she shouldn't believe in everything she hears. "You have to do your own research," I told her. It was a long period of time I had to explain to her that she should see the whole picture. See one side, and then the other: "Be critical and make your own interpretations." I helped her a lot. She was a good friend. Maybe she thought I was too engaged sometimes, but I thought, "Shit, I'm gonna lose her." I

felt that I had to drag her back in. For more than one year, I constantly talked to her. I cannot see sisters go into that trap.

Friends are usually the primary conversation partners of radicalized individuals, especially during adolescence and early adulthood. Adults, parents, and other family members can be regarded as part of the “establishment” that young seeking individuals want to distance themselves from, while friends are in many ways on their side against all kinds of authorities. That sodality can be an important resource when friends try to intervene.

Amina talked about a “friend of a friend” she described as an “extremist.” Many kept a certain distance because they did not want to get too involved with her, or were afraid of the influence, but Amina felt that she had a responsibility to intervene:

I refused to keep my distance. I trust myself, and I think that the only way this person can break out of this way of thinking is by being around people who don't think like that. Everyone kept a distance, but isolating them (extremists) is not a good thing (...) I talked to the person and was nice toward her. I just tried to be a friend. I felt that she needed someone, in that moment, and I wanted to be there.

For Amina, cultivating a friendship made it easier to gain a positive influence. The strong bonds of friendship involve risk because friends can be influenced by the radical rhetoric or feel obliged to “protect” their friends in conflicts, but it is crucial for interventions in radicalization processes. Such social bonds should therefore be seen as representing both a certain risk and a resource in regard to radicalization.

Abdullah's way out of extremism was learning from “brothers I know that are against IS and all these groups that favor extremism, radicalization, and jihad.” He emphasized that it was “really important” for his interrupted radicalization that he came to know these new people:

I got to know them in the mosque and they made me understand religion much better. Cause when you are with people like ISIS you don't learn anything. It's just jihad, jihad, jihad. There is no real knowledge. With the brothers I learned a lot. We read books. I didn't only learn about religion, but also stuff like philosophy and evolution. If I compare, it was a lot more knowledge there. It got me thinking that this was logical and made more sense.

After he left these extremist networks he tried to influence others, especially his old friends: “They're not doing that well, but they know me, so we have a relationship, we talk and we try to understand each other. Many have come back to Islam. They have left IS and are against extremism now.” Abdullah utilized his friendship bonds to gain an influence. It probably also made it easier for him to relate to radicalized friends because he had been part of these milieus himself, although this also involve a certain risk of taking up old habits. Radicalization and deradicalization do not occur in either a static or one-way fashion, but are fluid process that often ebb and flow over time.⁷⁴

Accessing new knowledge about Islam and finding new Islamic authorities were crucial in interrupting radicalization processes. When friends intervened it was often by guiding radicalized individuals toward new Islamic scholars. Abdullah explained what he did when trying to change his friends' opinions:

We try to help them, make them open up for more knowledge, right. They are locked. What we do is getting sources. If we discuss Sunni Islam then I get sources from Sunni Islam that confirm what I am trying to say. To prove them wrong, their way of thinking and ideology.

Abdullah's interventions toward his radical friends was an attempt at "theological detox" that involves trying to correct and calibrate certain theological arguments that encourages sympathy for or permits violent action in the name of Islam.⁷⁵

Yassin supported IS actively for several years. He similarly explained how important both friends and new knowledge were for his interrupted radicalization process: "There was this person that had been part of this extremist group. He started to talk to me about Islamic scholars, and there were some internet pages that explained why IS was wrong. Then everything became clear." Yassin detailed how someone had warned him that the extremist group he had joined had *khawarij*⁷⁶ attitudes.

When I listened to them I didn't understand it, but that was because of my lack of knowledge. I later understood that these people were those that the Prophet warned against. It became clearer and clearer, from their actions and thinking. No one were Muslims except them. I started to realize that this was wrong and I left them.

Yassin's change came as a result of a combination of personal maturation and being guided toward new sources of knowledge about Islam from people he trusted. Friends of radicalized individuals often contributed to deradicalization by providing counter-narratives to jihadi stories, for example about jihad, Sharia, shahid, the Caliphate, and kuffar.⁷⁷

There is an important temporal and contextual dimension of the radicalization and deradicalization processes described in this study. In the beginning of the Syrian civil war, many young Sunni Muslims supported IS because they were successfully fighting the Assad regime and because they shared IS's dream of an Islamic Caliphate. When IS's atrocities, war crimes, and terrorism gained increasing media attention, this gradually changed their perception of the organization. Yassin said that when people received more knowledge about IS, "it became clear what they represented, and Muslims started to take a different stand."

Tariq knew many people who went to Syria. He said, "There were also a lot of people who planned to go, but who stayed, and are here now. They say they are glad they stayed when they see how things developed." Marit similarly emphasized that she had constant discussions with her friends about these things: "A lot of people thought IS was the right thing then. But after they saw what they did, and got it documented, then a lot of people have distanced themselves." Uthman who admired IS before they came to Iraq in 2014, stated in a discussion of radicalization that "it really depends what time we are talking about." Still, regardless of historical context, influence from friends is pivotal in shaping and framing interpretations of religious or political views, and therefore also important for both radicalization and the interruption of radicalization processes.

In the same way as with interventions from family, interventions by friends occurred through personal relations, in private arenas, and as part of everyday life. It often involved leading the radicalized individuals toward new or different forms of Islamic knowledge and authorities—or providing them with new information about the groups

they supported. Whether it was successful or not depended on many external factors, but also on the frequency of contact and level of trust between the friends. It can be described as care-based intervention, where the level of personal involvement and the perception of the relationship of the radicalized individual were important. Like family intervention, it was also a form of direct informal social control.

Interventions by the Police and Secret Service

Interventions by family and friends stand out as the most prominent factor triggering interrupted radicalization for the individuals in this study. However, participants also described interventions from other actors, most importantly the police and secret service. As opposed to friends and family, these are secondary relations (based on weak emotional ties and little personal knowledge) in the public sphere, and were based on direct and formal measures of social control ultimately related to national security concerns. We therefore describe them as security-based interventions. Participants described how interventions from the police and its secret service had influenced their interrupted radicalization process. Some came into the spotlight of law enforcement agencies themselves, while others were deterred as they witnessed police interventions against friends or acquaintances who were involved with extremist networks or had shared extremist propaganda.

Abdullah described how he was called to a meeting with the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST). The reason was that he had posted several images and comments on Facebook that expressed support for IS. He was ambivalent about the meeting: “It was really bad. They weren’t that hard though, they just said they were worried and asked how things were.” When asked if this intervention had influenced his support of IS, Abdullah replied:

Abdullah: Yes, it was an important reason.

Interviewer: Was it a good thing that they came?

Abdullah: Actually, yes. Because if they had not come it would not have hit me that hard. So that I really understood what was happening. When I got that message from PST I thought, “Shit, what’s going on?”

Abdullah ended up being somewhat paranoid, thinking maybe he had “spies” around him, and there were also people who thought he was a spy. When you support extremist groups, “you cannot go to the mosque, you don’t trust people,” he said.

Yassin was another young Muslim who was approached by PST. In the beginning, he said, he was so into it (Salafist-jihadist activism) that he did not care much about police interventions. But later, he explained, “I wanted to show PST that I didn’t support them anymore, so that they would stop following me. I told them during the interrogation, ‘I’m done.’” Then “things got clearer and I felt that they stopped tapping my phone.” He was not sure, though: “Maybe they still listen in, but there is no reason for doing that.” Both Abdullah and Yassin illustrate how direct interventions or dialogue with the police or secret services contributed to interrupted radicalization processes. This might be most effective in the beginning of radicalization processes,⁷⁸ or when they are already on their way out for other reasons. The wish to “get a hold

on life” can become a particularly important influence to leave an extremist milieu when it is combined with a feeling of guilt or obligation toward moderate friends and family members.⁷⁹

Another way that interventions from police and secret service can have an impact is more indirect. Individuals at risk of radicalization can get a wake-up call if someone they know is approached by authorities. Mustafa had friends who had become “radicals,” in his words. When they were contacted by PST, he cut off all contact with them:

Then you keep away, because this is no game. PST can come and run down your door. If you live alone or with your family, they can come and make hell, even if you haven't done anything. Life is not the same afterwards (...) Myself and people I know have tried to stay as far away as we can. You get paranoid. They (PST) can ruin your family, even if you haven't done anything.

Martine had similar concerns. She had a friend that ended up with an armed Islamist group in Syria, but was worried about getting too involved, especially after she had a child:

PST surveil everything, I'm not sure who they follow, but I'm sure they keep track of her. So if I become a suspect, maybe I get into problems because I have a child. (...) I don't want the child care services to come knocking on my door, “You have contacts in Syria, that's not good.” It's scary.

By their interventions, both the police and secret service could contribute to isolating those they assessed as being in a radicalization processes, which could prevent further radicalization of persons in their social networks by stopping the diffusion of radical ideas and influences. Police intervention could also, however, lead to further radicalization of the targeted individual because the positive influences of friends and family vanished as they became increasingly isolated or socially excluded. Some bystanders would not risk getting too involved in trying to change the person targeted by the police for fear of being associated with the radicalized individuals and thus risking repercussions. In other words, the social isolation following security-based interventions made care-based interventions from friends and family harder.

Several participants criticized the authorities accordingly. Azzam said that “I don't think it's good at all. They just push them out, all of them.” Yassin thought the police and PST were “unprofessional,” he said: “They just end up making more people extreme (...) They should be more careful. Their actions give people good reasons to hate them.” Tariq similarly commented:

After a while people were excluded and banned from more and more mosques. They showed their faces in the media and then the mosques didn't want to be associated with them anymore. They were told that they weren't wanted there (...) To send youths out of the mosques is a big mistake. It's a mistake by Norwegian government, PST, and the mosques. It pushes them into a corner.

Tariq saw it as a shared societal responsibility that these individuals were increasingly socially isolated. He also mentioned how radicalized individuals became excluded from families, got into problems with their wives, lost their jobs and opportunities to marry, and were threatened with long prison sentences, and ended up asking rhetorically: “So if you can't marry, you can't work, you're thrown out from home, thrown

out of the mosque. Where do you go? I think that we, or society, sent some of those down there (to Syria).”

These arguments and comments should of course be interpreted as part of a larger life-story and seen as embedded in a particular social position. For people who have been involved in religious or political extremism, it can be tempting to blame someone else for their own and others’ radicalization and subsequent violence. The argument about the dangers of isolating radicalized individuals still points toward an important dilemma inherent in interventions that seek to prevent radicalization and violent extremism: the risk of contributing to the further radicalization by intervening, particularly when using exclusionary and punitive means. Police interventions can backfire and contribute to further radicalization,⁸⁰ and this risk is seemingly greater for security-based interventions than for interventions by family and friends.

Participants rarely described interventions from social workers, schoolteachers, or other public servants, which could represent a combination of or middle-position between care-based and more punitive interventions.⁸¹ Instead, participants’ main experience with those working in public services involved formal intervention and control by the police and secret service, primarily PST, in Norway (secondary relations in the public sphere). While the interventions by persons with relationships of close trust with the radicalized person are motivated by the family and friends’ concern for the person, interventions by the police and security service are mandated by their role in preventing potential crime. Sometimes these forms of intervention can work in parallel, but as demonstrated by this study, they can also come into conflict.

Discussion

We have examined early interventions against radicalization and their influence on individual radicalization trajectories. Our study finds that family and peer interventions were important for the interrupted radicalization that our participants experienced, and that police interventions played a relatively minor role and had mixed results. Radicalization processes were interrupted largely through a two-fold process of maturation and gaining knowledge, either of Islam or about certain Islamist groups in Syria, as the Syrian conflict received increased public attention. Family and friends played a key deradicalizing role in this process by their religious guidance, by challenging certain religious views and imposing social control, mainly independent of the police and state agencies. This points to some important but under-communicated and under-studied mechanisms of deradicalization.

The importance of family and friends for early stage deradicalization can partly be explained as a result of our sample and recruitment strategy. As opposed to much terrorism research, we did not select individuals because they were convicted of political violence or part of a deradicalization program. We recruited participants more broadly in the Muslim population and a smaller group who had been involved with extremist milieus. The recruitment strategy meant that we gained access to many individuals who were close to persons who had radicalized without attracting the attention of police or security services. We did not set out with a predefined interest in care-based interventions and primary relations, as opposed to security-based

interventions and secondary relations. Still, these radicalized persons had probably cut short their path of radicalization and arguably represented less of an imminent risk to public security than the samples usually studied in terrorism research. At the same time, and significantly, we assume that the number of low-profile radicals is generally much larger than the number of violent extremists known to the police,⁸² and our study therefore contributes important knowledge about widespread, but under-studied, reasons for interrupted radicalization.

Interventions by family and friends are motivated by and aimed at providing care, but also involve the imposition of social control, especially from parents. Compared to police interventions, however, interventions by family and friends involve substantially different means, and come with less threatening consequences for the radicalized individual. The police might also provide care by assisting a radicalized person in obtaining social or other public services, but always as part of their national security provision and counterterrorism task.⁸³ The police-initiated interventions thus involve an underlying threat that more serious coercive sanctions might follow. Family and peers can influence a radicalized person through strong social bonds and by utilizing a trusting relation, but the police and security services rarely have the established relationship needed to achieve this.

Our study did not follow radicalization trajectories over long time periods, but rather investigated the role of interventions for the interruption of radicalization at certain points in time. Radicalization processes are often contingent and non-linear, meaning that a person can deradicalize and disengage at one point in time but potentially re-radicalize or reengage at a later stage.⁸⁴ Countering an individual's radicalization might therefore be an ongoing struggle. In these cases, family and peers play a particularly important role as they have the greatest persistent access to the individual in question and thus also the ability to follow its development closely. This contrasts the potential of the police and other state agencies, who have little opportunity for continuous interactions over time.

Research on activist groups that use political violence has also shown that, on the individual level, the more time, efforts, and resources a person has invested in the group, the less likely he or she is to give in to attempts by police to push them out of their engagement by coercive measures.⁸⁵ That is another reason why friends and family play a particularly important role: They are better positioned than state agencies to intervene before a radicalized individual becomes too invested in an extremist milieu.⁸⁶ We have previously described the narrative opposition young Muslims have toward jihadism as “everyday resistance.”⁸⁷ We have also described a manifold “repertoire of everyday resistance” that young Muslims use to handle anti-Muslim hostility.⁸⁸ Similarly, and following research on the everyday in studies of violence⁸⁹ and crime prevention,⁹⁰ we believe that the positive role of friends and family can fruitfully be described as *everyday prevention of radicalization*.⁹¹

Our findings demonstrate the crucial role of strong social bonds and trusting relations for influencing an interruption of radicalization. Our relational and everyday research approach involved examining the interaction of the radicalized person with family, peers, and police. It was important to attend to the influences of all these actors in combination to more fully understand their interrelated roles and impacts.

They have different influences on the radicalized individual, but also impact each other and the social bonds and relations to the radicalized individual. When police and state agencies seeks to establish collaboration with a family for intervention, the partnership itself might create obstacles for a positive influence on the target person.⁹²

Early interventions by the police poses the risk of inadvertently pushing an individual perceived to be “at risk” further into radicalization, for example by enhancing the person’s feeling of alienation or being treated as a criminal despite not having committed any crime.⁹³ For others, like our study illustrates, an early intervention by the police can be the decisive wake-up call that triggers the individual to opt out of a radicalization trajectory. Police-initiated interventions have advantages and disadvantages, but they increasingly target families and emphasize the importance of engaging with family. Police-initiated interventions that facilitate or involve family members or peers risk disrupting the initial trusting relationship that a successful interruption of radicalization often depends on. As state agencies seek to engage with the family and peers close to a target person, they risk undermining that persons’ trusting relation to family and peers if they are perceived to be collaborating with police or secret service.⁹⁴

Despite being concerned about the well-being of families, state authorities often perceive them through a binary frame, “either as responsible for radicalization or as a source for information and intelligence.”⁹⁵ Such a reductive vision can contribute to antagonize families and increase their mistrust of state interventions.⁹⁶ This might further enhance the resistance that some families or relatives of radicalized or at-risk individuals may feel toward engaging with state interventions.⁹⁷ This highlights fundamental challenges for police interventions that seek out families and peers as intervention partners.⁹⁸ If Muslim communities perceive state counter-radicalization measures to be disproportionately or indiscriminately targeting them, this can further strengthen skepticism about engaging with state initiatives.⁹⁹ Authorities might then be forced to use coercive measures to pressure parents into collaborating with local government and interventions against radicalization.¹⁰⁰ In such hostile environments, families with a relative being supportive of or engaged in violent extremism live under strong pressure and fear of being victimized or suspected.¹⁰¹

Detrimental to parents’ willingness to contact or collaborate with police or other public agencies is also their perception of the risk to their own child, and whether collaboration with state authorities might lead to criminal sanctions for their child. Several European deradicalization programs are intended to enable families to intervene in a family member’s radicalization to avoiding coercive intervention by state actors.¹⁰² However, fear that shared information may be used against a loved one may still contribute to deterring family members or peers from utilizing assistance from state agencies.¹⁰³ The fear and potential for severe criminal sanctions in cases linked to violent extremism and terrorism is thus likely to represent an overwhelming barrier that prevents parents from contacting state authorities even when they want to.

Relatedly, questions and critiques have been raised about the fact that the security logic inherent in counter-radicalization might colonize or negatively impact other professional areas and concerns, like pedagogical or social concerns in the areas of school teaching, health care services, and numerous other professionals and public

services that have been tasked to engage in prevention of violent extremism.¹⁰⁴ The challenges of combining care and trust with coercion and surveillance have already been extensively pointed out by criminologists.¹⁰⁵ The potential negative impacts of interventions by the police and security service on relations between radicalized individuals and their family and peers,¹⁰⁶ and whether this type of intervention might distort ongoing interventions by family and friends, are key issues raised in our study. They exemplify the overarching dilemma that it is unclear when a security-based intervention by police and its security service will strengthen or weaken the positive impacts of care-based interventions by family and friends.

Conclusion

Our study has demonstrated the key role of moderate family members and peers in providing norms and social bonds that positively impacted radicalized persons by countering the influence of extremist milieus through kinship, emotional support and material goods, and the creation of obligations (e.g. in connection with marriage or having children) that helped interrupt further radicalization. Our study shows how family and peers can constantly influence and monitor a relative or friend and have positive impacts on them by informal intervention. This, we argue, is a common feature of the impact of family and peers in relation to radicalization in Norway and many other European countries. In this, we differ from much terrorism and radicalization research, which has primarily focused on the negative influences of family and peers.

Early interventions by family and friends is probably the most effective preventive measure against radicalization. It also involves less risk of potentially unwanted consequences than interventions by law enforcement agencies.¹⁰⁷ We therefore suggest that, while informal civilian interventions constitute the most common and thus perhaps the most important form of prevention of radicalization in society, it is too often overlooked in security and radicalization research. We do not argue, however, that these efforts will always succeed and be sufficient to prevent violent extremist behavior. Summarized, these forms of what we describe as *everyday prevention* of radicalization still have the advantages that they take place early in radicalization processes; are done by people trusted by radicalized individuals; manifest continuously as part of everyday life; have fewer damaging long-term repercussions for the radicalized individual; and hence also involve fewer unintended consequences, like triggering increased radicalization.

Critical readers might argue that the importance of friends and family for deradicalization outside of state-facilitated deradicalization programs and collaboration with police is self-evident. They could also argue that research should focus on what policymakers, state agencies, and public servants may influence, which is the primary state task of counter-radicalization. We would argue otherwise. Most importantly, we think it is crucial that research and state agencies acknowledge the independent role family and friends play in preventing radicalization. In our opinion, family and friends initiate and carry out most of the counter-radicalization efforts that take place in everyday life, and are—together with other trust-based networks in the local

community—the major sources of resilience or resistance to violent extremism.¹⁰⁸ While family and friends sometimes drive radicalization, the role they play in countering it is probably much more extensive. It is important that research, policy, and the police acknowledge, facilitate, and credit them for this, instead of viewing them primarily as risks or sources of radicalization.

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