Processes of Engagement and Disengagement in Islamic Activism

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Abstract

Political dimensions of Islam have a powerful presence in the transnational public sphere. However, the importance of the personal dimension in Islamist engagement has been underestimated. This article will look at how political action and activism are constructed in the activists' lives at the individual level, examining in particular the involvement and exit of three activists from radical Islamist movements in diasporic situations in Europe and in the USA. The concepts of engagement and disengagement are applied in the analysis. The article argues that political actions and processes are related to personal experiences and emotions. Emotions provide motivation and direction to political actions: emotions influence choices, and emotional reactions are a result of choices made. In this sense, belonging to a political group is a thoroughly emotional experience.

Introduction: Transnational Radical Islamic Activism

Most research related to Islamic activism is focused on structural, meta-theoretical or macro-level questions.[1] Anti-terrorism research, in turn, emphasizes different measures to prevent or stop terrorism.[2] Only to a

1 Quintan Wictorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism. A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

2 See e.g. Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence & Influence in Counterterrorism. A Component in the War on al Qaeda* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002); M.U. Ersen and Mustafa Kibaroğlu (eds.), *Analysis and Strategies to Counter the Terrorism Threat* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2011).

lesser extent has the literature examined how personal motivation and *engagement* to the cause of radical Islamic activism occur and, vice versa, how *disengagement* from radical Islamic movements is manifested. This article will look at how political action and activism are constructed in people's lives at the individual level, examining in particular people's involvement and exit from Islamist movements.

The case-studies on which this contribution is based are the autobiographies of people who have belonged to radical Islamist groups in diasporic situations, with a particular focus on the following three: *The Islamist* (2007) by Ed Husain, *My Year inside Radical Islam* (2007) by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and *Inside the Global Jihad: How I Infiltrated al Qaeda and was Abandoned by Western Intelligence* (2006) by Omar Nasiri.[3] The context of these three examined autobiographies is the transnational public sphere. In two cases, the activist actions have taken place in Europe and in one case, in the United States. The books are written originally in English, and they are targeted mainly to people living in the West, but presumably also to other Muslims. The publication of these types of autobiographies responds to the needs of the Western public to gain an insight into the thoughts and actions of violent Islamist activists, but they are also of interest in terms of the insights they reveal on the political debates within the diverse galaxy of Islamist movements. Although autobiographies are personal stories, they reveal an important understanding of politics and political action in general. This contribution argues that political activity is motivated and empowered by collectively expressed emotions. The politics of emotions forms a general framework by which to understand political activism and, more generally, protest or oppositional politics.

The various forms of Islamic activism differ considerably. The 9/11 terrorist attack showed a new model of Islamic activism: a very small group of people was able to destabilize the political and economic life of the globe. The 9/11 attack demonstrated a remarkable transformation of

3 Ed Husain, *The Islamist* (London: Penguin, 2007); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year inside Radical Islam* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher); Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad: How I Infiltrated al Qaeda and was Abandoned by Western Intelligence* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006).

Islamic activism. Previously, Islamic politics had been mainly nationally motivated, even though the reference to the global Islamic community (*Umma*) had always been an inspiring theme for the ideology of political Islam. With the establishment of Al-Qaeda, Islamic terrorism has taken the form of globalized and transnational terrorism, which has constructed violence as a normalized tool of political action. In addition to violent terrorism, non-violent activism related to Islam has remained as a tool of politicized forms of Islam. As a whole, there are Islamic movements which represent rather moderate and non-violent ideas of politics, but on the other hand, there are violent Islamist groups, which also practice, for example, suicide missions. In between these extremes there are numerous ways to engage in Islamically articulated politics.

This article will look at cases of involvement in radical, but not necessarily violent activism. At least, the authors of the three autobiographies do not describe their involvement in any terrorist action as such. The context of the activism is a diasporic and transnational sphere, which used to be the sphere providing an opportunity of action to such movements. Especially before the 'Arab Spring,' in fact, political Islam was severely impeded in Muslim majority countries. At the level of national politics, political Islam has often been a form of oppositional, marginalized, or forbidden politics, which meant that the political space for Islamic politics was very limited. Islamists living in Europe or in the USA, on the contrary, could find a suitable space for the expression of their political Islamic vision.

The examined autobiographies focus on Muslims who participate in transnational Islamic movements: Ed Husain in Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Gartenstein-Ross in Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation and Nasiri in the Algerian-based GIA (Group Islamique Armé). Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a transnational, Islamist political organization established in the 1950s with the aim of re-establishing a global Caliphate. It later spread to more than forty countries, and is active in Europe, especially in the UK. Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation used to be an international, Saudi-based charity organization which was later banned by the United Nations Security Council. The GIA is the armed wing of the Algerian Islamist insurgency,

originally established in Algeria in the early 1990s, but with cells in several European countries These movements represent rather different forms of activism if compared to more traditional Islamic political activism, like that of the Muslim Brothers (MB) in Egypt, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey, the PJD (Parti de la Justice et du Développement) in Morocco or the Nahda in Tunisia. The latter are all movements or political parties that operate within the framework of the political sphere of the nation state, trying to influence the domestic politics and the power structures within the state. In the diasporic situations represented in the three autobiographies under review in this contribution, on the contrary, the framework of political activism is the transnational political sphere. The political objectives of such transnational movements can include nationally motivated aims (especially in the case of the GIA), but their ideology is, by and large, globally designed: the purpose of Islamist action in this case is to influence global political discourses and practices by acting in a certain location in the diasporic sphere. It is also important to note that, contrary to traditional Islamist parties like the MB, AKP, PJD or Nahda, their actions often have a secretive nature and they operate as underground cells, although the articulation of their ideology is, in many cases, articulated in the open.

The transnational Islamic activism represented in the autobiographies reviewed in this study differs from traditional, nation-based Islamic activism also in its strategies of membership and participation, and can be considered as a form of radical Islamic activism having its own specific psychological and organizational dynamics. It is a world of radical Islamist networks that operate by recruiting members into clandestine or semi-clandestine cells or groups. It is typical for members of these groups to become at least partially isolated from their families, relatives and other social connections, and to avoid communicating their activities to people outside the group. This gives the typical activist member of the movements reviewed in this study, a unique psychological profile.

Motivation and Political Activism

An individual person does not suddenly turn into an extremist or a

terrorist,[4] but he or she moves towards activism and gradually becomes involved in different kinds of activities. The concept of *conversion* might be relevant here. In daily parlance the word is used as assuming a new religious belief but from the point of view of the psychology of religion, conversion indicates a transition to more intensely religious states of mind. According to William James, when a subject is converted "religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place," and "religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."[5] The process of conversion entails a change in how an individual perceives the world and in how he or she rearranges his or her mental and physical environment. Although many conversions are sudden and passive, James also emphasizes the possibility of gradual change occurring in the process of conversion: "In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits."[6]

In analysing religiously-motivated political activism, it is less useful to examine personality factors or root causes inspiring political actions, than the *routes* towards activism;[7] in other words, the ways in which individuals gradually engage in political practices. The gradual nature of the socialization processes and "pull factors" attracting people to political activism is decisive in the emergence of these different routes.[8] Activism as a group-based practice implies a connection between an individual and an activist community. Therefore, one cannot understand engagement to activism based only on personality factors, ideological opinions or sociological root causes, since these lack the relational dynamics of the engagement process. As Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan have argued, "individuals do not necessarily join extremist groups because they hold

4 Cf. John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The Annals of American Academy,* 618, 1, 2008, 80-94.

5 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature.* Edited with an Introduction by Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1902/1985).

6 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 206.

7 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 82.

8 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 84.

extremist views; they sometimes acquire extremist views because they have joined such a group for other reasons."[9] In other words, engagement in radical groups should be seen as a process during which activist and/or extremist ideologies are adopted, not as a process in which 'already extremist' people join extremist groups.

When studying collective action, most of the literature focuses on the processes whereby individuals become involved in social movements. Less attention has been paid to processes of disengagement and de-radicalization; in other words, how individual members of movements exit from circles of collective action and radical activist ideologies.[10] If the process of engagement can be understood as a gradual transition towards activism, disengagement too follows a similar logic: exit from activist movements rarely takes place suddenly, but it is usually a "gradual process of 'dissociation' from the movement"[11] or **"**a gradual series of steps and commitments."[12]

Disengagement can be a voluntary or involuntary process. In this article, the focus will be primarily on voluntary exit processes, in which the disengagement of an individual activist takes place. There can be various 'push' and 'pull' factors directing the disengagement process: "'push' relates to negative social forces and circumstances which make it

9 Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, "Introduction," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and Collective Disengagement*, eds. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-13; see also Tore Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and Collective Disengagement*, eds. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009), 30-48.

10 See e.g. Kate Barrelle, *Disengagement from Violent Extremism*. ARC Linkage Project on Radicalisation - Conference 2010: Understanding Terrorism from an Australian Perspective: radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter radicalization. 8 November, 2010, Monash University, 1-29. Http://arts.monash.edu.au/radicalisation/conferences-and-events/conference-2010/--downloads/disengagement-from-violent-extremism-kb.pdf; accessed June 27, 2012 (Melbourne: Monash University, 2010); Emma Disley et al., *Individual Disengagement from Al Qa'ida-influenced Terrorist Groups. A Rapid Evidence Assessment to Inform Policy and Practice in Preventing Terrorism.* Technical Report. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2012/RAND_TR785.pdf; accessed June 27, 2012 (Cambridge: RAND Europe, 2012); Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 80-94.

11 Bjørgo and Horgan, "Introduction," 6.

12 Bjørgo and Horgan, "Introduction," 7.

unattractive and unpleasant to remain in a particular social environment, whereas 'pull' refers to factors attracting the person to a more rewarding alternative."[13] Disengagement can be accompanied by a process of de-radicalization, but not necessarily. De-radicalization applies when the level of commitment to a radical ideology decreases in one's life, but one can also disengage from radical political movements without personal de-radicalization.

Processes of engagement and disengagement can be studied in various ways. In this article, the main argument is that political actions and processes are related to personal experiences and emotions. As Ian Burkitt states, "any analysis of power, government, and politics that does not consider emotion misses its essential element."[14] In order to understand the political dimension of emotions, these should not be regarded merely as individual and somehow 'internal' phenomena[15] or as responses to external stimuli. Emotions are not passive reactions to external forces, but they emerge as part of the relationship between an individual and a physical, social, and cultural context. Emotions should not be located within the sphere of subjectivity alone,[16] even though an emotion is, at its roots, an individual phenomenon. As stated by Theodore Kemper, in fact, "only individuals experience emotions." Kemper, however, also notes that there can be a group emotion or a dominant emotion within a group: "some aggregate of individuals is feeling something that is sufficiently alike to be identified as the common emotion of that aggregate."[17]

Emotions occur in social relations.[18] The politics of emotion is a relational issue characterized by reciprocity. Different emotional

13 Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement," 36.
14 Ian Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions: Power, Government and Opposition in the 'War on Terror'," *Sociology,* 39, 4, 2005, 679-695.
15 See Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions," 679.
16 Cf. Mustafa Emirbayer and Chad Alan Goldberg, "Pragmatism, Bourdieu, and Collective Emotions in Contentious Politics," *Theory and Society,* 34, 5-6, 2005, 469-518.
17 Theodore Kemper, "Predicting Emotions in Groups: Some Lessons from September 2001," in *Emotions and Sociology*, ed. Jack Barbalet (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 53-68.
18 Jack Barbalet, "Introduction: Why Emotions are Crucial," in *Emotions and Sociology*, ed. Jack Barbalet (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1-9.

reactions enhance each other, as pointed out by Elisabeth Porter: "Emotions influence the ways in which we respond to and engage with our relationships."[19] Kemper, in turn, emphasizes the issue of power and status when trying to understand the relational nature of emotions:

> Anger results from a loss of status, fear from a loss of power relative to other[s], sadness from a loss of a status that is irremediable, joy from a gain of power. These emotions are thus responses to outcomes of interaction in power and status terms. Beyond these primary emotions, guilt is understood to be the emotion felt when one understands that one has used excess power on another. Shame is understood as the emotion felt when one has acted in a manner that belies the amount of status that one expects another to confer on oneself, that is, one has not acted in a status-worthy manner.[20]

Political action and emotions are closely connected to each other. Emotions provide motivation and direction to political actions: emotions influence choices, and emotional reactions are the result of choices made.[21] Political behaviour and action emerge from different emotions – such as fear and anxiety – which are related to the direction and the consequences of change.[22] Emotions also regulate values and political ideals and thus determine what is good and right. Emotions "play a role in our thinking about the good and the just, and therefore in evaluations of political ideas and ideals."[23] Emotions could be understood as an energy that might change social reality and have effects on the structures and

19 Elisabeth Porter, "Can Politics Practice Compassion?," *Hypatia,* 21, 4, 2006, 97-123.
20 Kemper, "Predicting Emotions", 56.
21 Jonathan Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology in International Politics," *International Organization,* 59, Winter 2005, 77-106.
22 Russ Vince, "The Politics of Imagined Stability: A Psychodynamic Understanding of Change at Hyder plc.," *Human Relations,* 55, 10, 2002, 1189-1208.
23 Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions," 682.

cultures of a society.[24] Here the concept of emotional power is useful in understanding political action: emotions are able to move "people into protest and enthuse and electrify a crowd."[25] Emotional power is also related to collective identities. If a certain group has a strong feeling of group identity, this "leads to sharing, cooperation, perceived mutuality of interest, and willingness to sacrifice personal interests for group interests."[26] People have to invest emotional significance in groups in order to "care about them; if people do not care, they neither cooperate nor compete."[27] Shared feelings and emotions are therefore essential to collective identifications.

The emotional side of politics has often been linked to social movements and oppositional politics.[28] While political and social movements are frequently studied in terms of resources or power positions, the emotional perspective emphasizes collective psychology and the reformulation of emotions in contentious politics.[29] In this sense, belonging to a social or political movement is seen as a thoroughly emotional experience: recruitment into a movement, staying in and dropping out, can all involve a strong emotional aspect.[30] Therefore, when we try to understand Islamic activism, "an understanding of the emotionality that both motivates and is generated by action" is required.[31]

Politically motivated emotions are collective phenomena which need a wide arena to reach a global audience. When trying to understand global Islamist movements, it is particularly important to recognize

24 J.H.Turner, *Human Emotions. A Sociological Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007).
25 Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions," 680.
26 Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology," 96.
27 Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology," 96.
28 See e.g. Jeff Goodwin et al. (eds.), *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Paul Hoggett, *Politics, Identity and Emotion* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009); Sarita Srivastava, "Tears, Fears and Careers: Anti-racism and Emotion in Social Movement Organizations," *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie,* 31, 1, 2006, 55-90; Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions".
29 Cf. Emirbayer and Goldberg, "Pragmatism, Bourdieu," 470.
30 Jacqueline Adams, "The Bitter End: Emotions at a Movement's Conclusion," *Sociological Inquiry,* 73, 1, 2003, 84-113.
31 Marian Barnes, "Passionate Participation: Emotional Experiences and Expressions in Deliberative Forums," *Critical Social Policy*, 28, 4, 2008, 461-481.

the effects of the mass media. Emotional life – including rituals, performative acts and symbols – is being transformed and also shaped by media constructs.[32] The Internet, television, mobile phones and other communication devices are effective transmitters of information and emotions. Mediatization has changed the preconditions for political action, not only in the West, but also in the Muslim world. Media have brought radical Islamist political actions, ideas and messages to a worldwide audience, consisting of both Muslims and non-Muslims. The mediatization of radical Islamist politics has provided a platform for new kinds of communities and political coalitions. With their use of global media, radical Islamist movements have promoted a political conflict which could be named as the "global clash of emotions."[33] Media in all their forms have also helped create networks among Muslims living in various countries, and continue to play an important role in enforcing the feeling of community. For instance, feelings of victimization and anger are fed by the use of stereotyped images of Muslims and the 'Muslim world' in general by the media.[34]

Autobiographies as an Object of Study

The three autobiographies examined in this article illustrate what can be called a "personal protest cycle" to Islamist activism.[35] The writer of this article uses this term to describe the cycle whereby an individual experiences radical Islamist engagement. In his book, Ed Husain describes first his association with the *Young Muslim Organization* at the age of sixteen in London, then his election as the president of the *Islamic Society* at college, and finally, his affiliation to Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a transnational

32 Jeremy R. Carrette "Religion and Mestrovic's Postemotional Society: The Manufacturing of Religious Emotion," *Religion,* 34, 4, 2004, 271-289.

33 Dominique Moïsi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion. How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

34 See Aini Linjakumpu, *Islamin globaalit verkostot* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2009); Aini Linjakumpu, "Globalized Islam in Europe. The Cartoon Crises as Transnational Politics," *Temenos,* 46, 2, 2011, 175-195.

35 Cf. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation. Knowing our Enemy. Strengthening Ourselves.* http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG454.pdf; accessed June 27, 2012. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006).

Islamist organization. The book illustrates his journey to Islamism as well as his withdrawal from it. It is a nuanced narration of the ways in which emotions are connected to processes of political engagement and disengagement. The author narrates a personal engagement that lasts several years, followed by a slow process of gradual disillusion.

The autobiographies by Gartenstein-Ross and Nasiri are somehow different to Husain's. In their lives, in fact, the engagement to radical Islamic activism was more short-lived and to some extent superficial. Nasiri's book is mainly an account of the time he spent working as a spy for French counter-intelligence, after his decision to withdraw from an Islamist cell linked to the Algerian GIA. The book by Gartenstein-Ross covers a short time span of his life, during which he was working in the *Al-Haramain Foundation*. After their withdrawal from Islamic activism, all three authors have been engaged in counter-terrorism activities, which are also described, at least to a certain extent, in the books.

This article will specifically deal with the periods of time during which the authors were involved in radical activist circles. Even though the time spent with radical Islamism, especially by Gartenstein-Ross and Nasiri, was rather limited, the autobiographies do provide relevant insights into the logic of engagement in and disengagement from political activism in terms of emotions. Generally speaking, these three autobiographies do not provide universal truths about the processes of engagement into radical Islamic activism, but are valid interpretations of personal experiences in the context of transnational radical Islamist networks. These narratives tell an autobiographical truth; "it is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life."[36] Autobiographical narratives are neither historical documents nor "sources of evidence for the analysis of historical movements or events, or persons."[37] Therefore, autobiographies cannot be understood as historical records, but they offer a subjective interpretation of certain events, time and people.

36 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

37 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 13.

The autobiographies show the mechanisms of emotional engagement, as well as the gradual decrease in the level of engagement in the lives of the authors. In the beginning, personal engagement in radical activism requires a suitable background and social context: political activism does not emerge without justifiable conditions and without specific needs on the part of the potential activist.[38] Nevertheless, it should be noted that engagement and socialization into radical Islamist activism is not a process in which people living under the same social, political, economic and personal conditions would automatically become involved.[39] Rather, engagement is an exceptional process in one's life with consecutive steps of involvement to radical activism.

Emotional Engagement into Radical Islamist Activism

Disappointment, isolation and anger

In the three autobiographies studied, the starting point is always a disappointment in an existing personal, social and political situation and an attempt to start a better and more meaningful life. On a personal level, the three authors had some kind of nonconformity to the social norms of their immediate surroundings and everyday life; for example, school, work or study. The needs and questions the three authors used to pose in their lives were not answered by their immediate environment. Maladjustment could also be related to personal experiences:

> ... I had some intense spiritual questions. Not only did I feel isolated at Wake Forest, but I also came close to dying twice before I turned twenty-one. After a couple of brushes with death, I was acutely aware of emptiness in my life.[40]

38 John M. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join al-Qaeda*. Special Report. Http://dspace.cigilibrary.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/28901/1/Why%20Youth%20Join%20al-Qaeda.pdf?1; accessed June 28, 2012. (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

39 See Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 85.

40 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 9.

> The three biggest things that were missing from my life were friendship, a sense of purpose, and a relationship with God.[41]
>
> At school, I was now even more of a misfit.[42]

The sense of maladjustment, isolation and strangeness – emotional vulnerability[43] – may be aggravated by an unsatisfactory position in society, both in the diaspora or inside the countries of origin themselves.[44] Under appropriate circumstances, maladjustment may be associated with anger. The formation of anger requires an increase in social and political awareness. The new understanding that Muslims in the diaspora acquire of the political predicament of their countries of origin, as well as of the historical grievances of their countries, could create both a motivation and a basis for hate.[45] This can be aggravated by a difficult personal situation on the part of the would-be activist. In this way, the smooth transition to activism, which was already taking place, is rationalized by the subject, while being at the same time motivated by the influence of others. The basis of political identity lies in the mobilization of emotions and hostility against a certain group of people.[46]

In the cases under examination, the experiences of frustration and anger were the bases for inner change and for a transition to a politically active phase. Anger is suitable for "facilitating confrontational action on behalf of the in-group."[47] In the three autobiographies, the development of the feeling of anger does not happen suddenly, but takes shape gradually, either through a series of events or by a conscious adoption by the subject. In order for anger to be transformed into action, the subject needs to develop a clear idea of where to direct his anger as well as of

41 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 13.
42 Husain, *The Islamist*, 19.
43 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 85.
44 Venhaus, *Why Youth Join*, 2.
45 See Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad*, 56-58.
46 Cf. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join*, 8-9.
47 Diana J. Leonard et al., " 'We're Mad as Hell and We're not Going to Take it Anymore': Anger Self-stereotyping and Collective Action," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations,* 14, 1, 2011, 99-111.

what the consequences of this might be. This might create an emotional combination of anger and hope, in which hope creates a window of opportunity out of an existing unsatisfactory situation. The awareness of other similar kinds of struggles or actors reinforces the confidence in one's own actions. Islamist networks based in different localities in the diaspora do not necessarily have an organic link between each other at the transnational level; yet the feeling of belonging to a wider network of Muslims (*Umma*) and, more specifically, of politically active Islamists, builds a perception that one is not alone with one's political and religious mission:

> Hakim and I spent a lot of time talking about politics, about the injustices inflicted on Muslims all over the world. It was the end of 1993 and the war in Bosnia had been going on for almost two years already, as had the war in Algeria. I had been aware of all this long before Hakim returned to Morocco. Every Muslim was [aware]. But it was the war in Afghanistan I knew most about. [...]. And like everyone else, I hated the Russians.[48]

Radical Islamist movements often use emotional strategies in a conscious way. When they try to recruit new potential activists or to inspire other Muslims, Islamist movements aim at affecting the emotions and feelings of the potential new member. Husain tells of how he and his comrades tried to instill the feelings of guilt, shame and humiliation on other Muslim students.[49] Activist leaders try to create and legitimize emotional norms, deciding how activists "should feel about themselves and about dominant groups and how they should manage and express the feelings evoked by their day-to-day encounters with dominant groups, often through ritual; as such, movements may contain their own emotion culture."[50] Accordingly, emotions are not entirely spontaneous, and

48 Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad*, 22.
49 Husain, *The Islamist*, 63.
50 Adams, "The Bitter End," 87.

certain activist groups attempt to control their members' emotional experiences. Religions, with their powerful emotional history, construct a cultural capital which can be used selectively for political purposes. Past and historical emotions are manipulated and manufactured for the use of contemporary politics and, more generally, for shaping human consciousness.[51]

Religious and ideological motivation

The shift from feelings of hate and frustration to an Islamically articulated political ideology and action is possible through the earlier experiences of the person and through an existing 'cultural toolkit.' In the cases under review in this article, religion has at some point played a meaningful and probably positive role in the lives of the authors, either personally or in the context of the family.[52] The politicization of Islam, however, has not been an obvious element in the lives of these authors, but has evolved over time. Their own past experiences of Islam are the basis for the transition to a politically active phase. Such a transition comes across in these autobiographies as somehow 'natural.' It should be noted that religion does not automatically become a meaningful political factor. Therefore, there has to be some earlier form of articulation of the religious factor that transforms into a more and more political direction. Non-politically articulated Islam is understood by the authors of the autobiographies, especially in the cases of Husain and Gartenstein-Ross, as an incomplete and even incorrect form of Islam, whilst in turn, the politically active form of Islam embraced later is interpreted as the perfect or 'more correct' Islam.

In the case of Islamist activism, religious tenets are an obvious basis for emotionally charged activities. However, the level of understanding of religious doctrines is not very prominent.[53] On the contrary, the authors mostly rely on inadequate and sketchy interpretations of Islam. Regardless of the religious knowledge of the authors, however, religious conviction forms a firm basis for emotional politics and actions, for it provides a

51 Carrette "Religion and Mestrovic's Postemotional Society," 279, 287.
52 See Husain, *The Islamist*, 11-14; Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 2-4.
53 Cf. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join*, 5.

bridge between individual and collective experiences, and also between this world and the Hereafter. The feeling of belonging to an omnipotent and eternal entity can act as an important emancipatory force. In a way, religions can create symbolic spaces which attract people to commit to religiously-based collectives and movements. Furthermore, religion "influences members' emotion that keeps people from leaving a movement and contributes to its strengths."[54] In this sense, religion could also be seen as an emotional capital for Islamist activists; it is a "resource for mobilizing potential participants and for sustaining their involvement."[55]

In the three autobiographies there is surprisingly little ideological consideration of the reasons why the authors engaged in activism. For the activists who live in the diaspora in non-Muslim countries, the ideological and political starting points are not as self-evident as for those living in Muslim-majority countries. For the diaspora activists, political factors occur only randomly or sporadically and as such, the motivators of political action gain their ground in a flexible way. In the diaspora, ideological and political factors interrelate with the above-mentioned feelings of maladjustment.

The global humiliation of Muslims and the personal identification with victims of injustice and violence are a basic factor determining the authors' emotional responses. The problematic position of many Muslims in the diaspora can be combined with the humiliation stories that are circulated through the Internet and television within Muslim countries: identification with victims or "suffering of Muslims around the world"[56] is common among Islamist activists. Thus, the personal experiences of the individual interrelate to the reality of the Islamic world and to its earlier history. The narratives of humiliation can also be a contributing factor of positive marginality,[57] with the help of which the sensibility of

54 Adams, "The Bitter End," 86.
55 Jennifer Dunn, "The Politics of Empathy: Social Movements and Victim Repertoires," *Sociological Focus,* 37, 3, 2004, 235-250.
56 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 85.
57 Cf. Ruth L. Hall and Michelle Fine, "The Stories We Tell: The Lives and Friendship of Two Older Black Lesbians," *Psychology of Women Quarterly,* 29, 2, 2005, 177-187.

political participation is emergent. This participation thus provides an emancipatory potential to the authors' own lives.

Political divisions appear rather clearly in all three autobiographies: the world is divided between those reacting favorably and those reacting negatively to the 'true Islam.' The identification of the main enemy can differ. In the case of diasporic activists, the concept of an external enemy is wide and flexible. It can be located within their own environment or it can also be a subject at supra-national or global level. On the other hand, there are several internal enemies of Islam recognized in the autobiographies, who are represented as 'secularized Muslims,' the governments of Muslim-majority countries, other activist Islamist groups or even individual people. It should be noted that not a single biography represents the Islamic world as a uniform or faultless entity, and in each and every biography, somebody or something is identified as an 'enemy' coming from within the Islamic world.

Comradeship as a Motivation

In the three autobiographies, engagement with radical Islamist activism does not take place at an organizational level, but through individual and informal encounters. Thus, the intensification of emotions and the concurrent mental shift towards activism require encounters with other people as well as a suitable socio-political situation, in which one's own experiences appear relevant. In all the autobiographies, the role of a 'mentor' or a kind of 'mediator' is decisive. In all the cases examined, there is somebody who has acted as a 'guide' to new ideas and possibly activism.[58]

The encounters with a mentor or new comrades are fed by feelings of anger and disappointment, but, at the same time, something else is provided as a substitute for negative feelings. Access to circles of activists and a feeling about the relevance of one's own existence provide a motivation to enter more deeply into a particular ideology and form of activism. An important dimension of the engagement is:

58 See Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 11-23; Husain, *The Islamist*, 54-57; Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad*, 22-24.

> A sense of reward that the recruit has about what 'being in this movement' represents. [...] In practical terms, involvement might result in heightened status, respect, or authority within the immediate peer group, the broader radical movement, and (at least as imagined by the recruit) the wider Muslim community.[59]

According to the autobiographies, the access to activist circles itself cannot be seen as a self-evident course of action. The experiences of comradeship and togetherness emerge as an important factor in the autobiographies.[60] To somebody like Husain who has been a social misfit and isolated, the emotional connection to like-minded people and their acceptance can be a very powerful motivating factor in the final transition to activism. As Husain argues: "I was genuinely impressed by his [a leader of Young Muslim Organization] tender and brotherly behavior."[61] Joining a radical movement can become a natural choice if there are no other equally attractive future prospects, and the transition to activism can take place mentally and emotionally very quickly if the situation is suitable and the person is prone to change:

> Looking back, I am still astonished by how I became so confident so quickly following my affiliation with the Hizb.[62]

To be part of a purposeful organization and to work with comrades sharing a common ideology and goals may create a strong sense of belonging. Joint activities go hand in hand with constructing the comradeship. In many instances, Islamic activists have lived or at least worked together intensively and created a strong feeling of togetherness. This kind of life can effectively fulfill one's need to belong to a group which defines one's identity, role, friends and interaction with society.[63] If a certain group has a strong feeling

59 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 85.
60 See Husain, *The Islamist*, 30; Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 22-23.
61 Husain, *The Islamist*, 30.
62 Husain, *The Islamist*, 92.
63 Venhaus, *Why Youth Join*, 10.

of identity, this "leads to sharing, cooperation, perceived mutuality of interest, and willingness to sacrifice personal interests for group interests."[64] People have to invest emotional significance in groups in order to "care about them; if people do not care, they neither cooperate nor compete."[65] Shared feelings and emotions are essential to collective identifications.

Changing to radical activism requires a detachment from the former way of life and social connections. In the autobiographies, the mutiny against a previous life, family and its values is obvious. It seems difficult for the authors to combine their former social and cultural attitudes with the new form of activism they have adopted. In these cases, the politicization of religion has been so powerful that it can no longer be linked to the 'non-political' forms of Islam represented by family or other social environments. New partners usually encourage or sometimes even force a decision between activism and the author's former way of life and environment. The crisis may be preceded by a selection of choices: one could live a double-life, balancing between different alternatives; however in the examined cases, performing a balancing act turned out to be difficult, and therefore the choices were in most cases in favour of the new form of activism embraced:

> I was betraying my parents, beginning to lead a double life.[66]
>
> I had a harsher edge around Amy and my parents than ever before, and would tell them far less of what was going on in my life. I remembered how, at one point during the summer, my dad remarked sadly that he and I didn't really talk anymore. He was right [...].[67]

The End of Motivation: Disengagement from Radical Islamist Activism

If the engagement into radical Islamist circles is a relatively uncommon phenomenon among potential members in the diasporic context,

64 Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology," 96.
65 Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology," 96.
66 Husain, *The Islamist*, 31.
67 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 182; see also 143-144, 147, 178.

disengagement from radical activism is relatively common for activists, because commitment to activism is difficult to sustain in such radical and secretive groups. Even though disengagement is a common phenomenon in political activism, the "disengagement phase remains the most poorly understood and least researched."[68] Disengagement is related to the discontinuation of the "sense of positive expectation"[69] and one's motivation in the activist circles. The three autobiographies can be considered as interesting cases of 'complete' narratives, for they deal with both the engagement and the disengagement from activism. Thus, they do not reflect how activism in the group would have continued further, if membership had continued. The autobiographies illustrate how the subjects have, for a span of time, strongly committed to a specific ideology and form of activism. The commitment has been comprehensive, and therefore it is understandable that maintaining such intensity has not been simple. This type of activism requires increasingly extreme contributions, or ultimately, one has to withdraw from it.[70]

The emotional link between an individual actor and an organization may have been very strong, yet emotions cannot be entirely forced. In other words, emotional politics may be of an uncompromising nature, but they have to be based on voluntary actions in order to be effective. This is also apparent in the case of radical Islamist movements. Although many organizations have been very successful in their emotional politics, a possible weakness also exists. The emotional commitment to an organization, in fact, can change or disappear, and therefore politics based on "constant mobilization of emotion"[71] can be unpredictable:

> It is the ambivalence and alternation of emotions, which makes emotional responses hard to predict in all relations,

68 Horgan," From Profiles to Pathways," 93.
69 Horgan," From Profiles to Pathways," 92.
70 Cf. Donatelli Della Porta, "Leaving Underground Organizations: A Sociological Analysis of the Italian Case," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and collective disengagement*, eds. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009), 66-87.
71 David Ost, "Politics as the Mobilization of Anger. Emotions in Movements and in Power," *European Journal of Social Theory,* 7, 2, 2004, 229-244.

> including political relations. This means that it is difficult for governments, or any political group, to manipulate emotion in order to govern by directing conduct.[72]

The process of disengagement normally contains several overlapping elements: for example, a disillusionment caused by a gap between the initial ideals and the reality experienced within the activist circles, the existence of triggering factors that facilitate the exit, becoming exhausted and finally, a change of personal priorities.[73] These elements are all clearly present in the autobiographies.

Disillusionment and Emotional de-Radicalization

Disillusionment means that one begins to nourish doubts about the legitimacy and justification of the group's activities: some activists "experience self-doubt where they feel that what they had believed in and fought for was wrong, both morally and politically."[74] Ideological or behavioural de-radicalization is also related to *emotional* de-radicalization, including a culmination or a triggering factor "that calls into question a person's commitment to a radical organization."[75] In other words, activities and ideologies no longer meet the expectations of activists, and step by step, antagonism and suspicion against them can arise.

In addition to suspicion, an increased awareness of different possible activities has affected the withdrawal of the authors of the three autobiographies. Husain reflects on his own life and tells how he slowly became aware of how deep Hizb ut-Tahrir had permeated into his life and his "teenage mind."[76] Activist involvement was going too far and was about to become too concrete; it was no longer just speeches and

72 Burkitt, "Powerful Emotions," 684.
73 See John Horgan, "Individual Disengagement: A Psychological Analysis," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and collective disengagement*, eds. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009), 17-29.
74 Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement," 36-37.
75 Angel Rabasa et al, *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists.* Http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1053.pdf; accessed June 27, 2012. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010).
76 Husain, *The Islamist*, 157.

rhetoric, but there was also a demand for more straightforward actions.[77] Husain was not prepared to engage in all that the group would have required. Gartenstein-Ross, in turn, was suspicious from the beginning of his period of activism; for example towards the strict rules adopted by *Al-Haramain* members. Despite that, he went deeper and deeper to the hard-edged activism until he also began to separate from it gradually.[78] This behavioural disengagement process was associated with a feeling of uncertainty, as can be seen from his reflections:

> When you became Muslim, you thought that the moderate interpretation was clearly right. You thought that extremists were either ignorant or manipulating the faith for their own gain. Your time at Al Haramain has made you question this. As your cherished vision of Islam collapses, you're left feeling depressed, helpless and confused.[79]

Suspicion is also linked to disillusionment: in other words, the discordance between the ideals of the activists and reality. Expectations are not met, which causes disappointment in the activities and actions. Disillusionment could be related to the way that the group operates: for example, an increased amount of violence in operations could lead to disengagement.[80] Nasiri describes how his increasing proximity to violence gave him a reason to disassociate himself from the group to which he belonged:

> It was the first time I truly felt how close I was to all this horror. [...] I bought the guns for Yasin because it was exciting, and because I needed the money. Often I fantasized the weapons were going off to Bosnia or Chechnya, that they were being used to fight legitimate wars against the

77 Husain, *The Islamist*, 154.
78 See e.g. Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 105, 108, 110, 136, 210.
79 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 224.
80 Barrelle, *Disengagement from Violent Extremism,* 11; Disley et al., *Individual Disengagement*, 11, 13-14, 32.

> enemies of Islam. Of course I knew most of the stuff was going to Algeria, but that didn't bother me at the beginning. I had come to feel differently as I read more, and as the GIA become more vicious. Everything was different now. The people on the plane were real to me: Arab immigrants living in Europe who loved their families and their land, and wanted to go home for holiday. The GIA had tried to kill them all. It was horrifying to me, and when I heard the tape I knew that I was connected to it. I hadn't pulled the trigger, but maybe I had supplied the guns and the bullets. I was a killer, just like them.[81]

Disappointment could also be directed against other Muslims. Muslims in the diaspora often have the underlying myth of a supposed unity amongst all Muslims with shared values and ideologies: they have an idealized impression, especially of Muslims living in Muslim countries. Their Islamist activism is often linked to the dream of contributing to a better future for Muslim-majority countries. Husain aptly describes the feeling of disappointment that he experienced when he saw that Saudis on holiday in London were not interested in the common cause of the Islamist struggle, but only in their own amusement:

> London was a popular tourist destination for many Gulf Arabs during the summer months, so the Hizb made it their business to maintain a six-hour presence every evening near the hotels they favored. The intention was to distribute leaflets calling for a replacement of Arab governments and inviting Arab tourists to join the work 'towards establishing an Islamic state', but most of the Gulf Arabs I met on the Edgware Road, many of whom were Saudis, were more interested in calling female escorts from phone booths than listening to a Hizb politico ranting about an Islamic state. [...] Their lack of

81 Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad*, 59.

> support for what we were trying to do, their indifference to the future of the Islamic state, and their derisive attitude towards Hizb ut-Tahrir struck me as odd. There we were, trying to liberate them from tyranny, and they could not care less.[82]

Longing for a Normal Life

A leading factor in the process of disengagement is the appeal of an ordinary life outside the activist groups.[83] According to Bjørgo, "the main reason for joining is that such tight-knit and secretive groups fulfil a number of their social and psychological needs, in terms of providing identity, community, protection and excitement."[84] Thus they leave the group for many of the same reasons as they once joined. Another factor contributing to the disengagement is the exhaustion with the activist life style, which could be seen "linked to the stress of a commitment which is too demanding in terms of time or emotional investment."[85] The three autobiographies show the disappointment in the subjects' lives as activists, where the comprehensive commitment leaves no room for a normal everyday life with its joys: life becomes grave and joyless. Being a member of an activist, secretive movement can provide fulfilment for certain needs, but one's personal life can become emotionally empty. Therefore, in the long run, it does not offer enjoyment or 'emotional response':

> There had been a fleeting moment of community, a fleeting moment in Winston-Salem where my Islam fuelled my activism and my activism fuelled my Islam. But was that all illusory? [...] I was beginning again to feel isolated.[86]
>
> We had to remember that there was nothing particularly

82 Husain, *The Islamist*, 136-137.
83 Cf. Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement," 39.
84 Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement," 47.
85 della Porta, "Leaving Underground Organizations," 80; see also Bjørgo 2009, 38.
86 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 127.

> moral or immoral in life, only God's commands. Our own feelings had nothing to do with it.[87]

Gartenstein-Ross, in turn, shows how the form of activism he was involved in, used to limit the aesthetic dimensions of life; in the radical Islamist mind-set, political religion is sufficient to meet all expectations of human life:

> But this year I was far less interested in the world's beauty. The only beauty I cared about was the beauty of the thereafter. To get there, I didn't need to appreciate the aesthetics of warm summer day; I needed to follow Allah's rule.[88]
>
> I was unhappy but the conclusions I had reached, the method of interpretation I was using – they were right. Happiness, I was sure, would come later.[89]

This type of radical activist lifestyle is tightly focused and defined by several rules, and normal social relations and activities do not easily fit into it. When the subject experiences something outside the normal routine of the religious and activist commitments, opening up for relationships outside of the group and becoming part of an activist's life, withdrawal is easier.[90] In particular, love affairs and the birth of children are likely to change, fundamentally, the perception of the priorities of one's own life, as in the cases of Gartenstein-Ross and Husain. In their cases, a change of priorities in life is also an indication of a change in emotional commitments; the former emotional environment within activist circles no longer appears emotionally appealing. Kari Marie Norgaard argues that "emotions can be a source of information and an impetus for social action, but the desire to avoid unpleasant emotions and the need for emotion management can also prevent social movement participation."[91]

87 Husain, *The Islamist*, 102; see also Husain, *The Islamist*, 127-128, 148.
88 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 158.
89 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 178.
90 Cf. Disley et al., *Individual Disengagement*," 11-13; 28.
91 Kari Marie Norgaard, "Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation," *Sociological Inquiry,* 76, 3, 2006, 372-396.

In the three autobiographies, becoming an activist has originated from a desire to see and understand Islam more broadly, and not just as a religious or cultural domain. However, and paradoxically, the gradual overemphasizing of the political dimensions of Islam has resulted in a narrow understanding and interpretation of the religion. The autobiographies show, amongst other disappointments, the fact that over time the authors' overall relation to Islam appears to have become unsatisfactory. Husain describes how his connection with God started deteriorating when politics was more firmly at hand;[92] religion had disappeared or at least diminished in his own life and only politics and fanaticism were left. He describes it as "wanting more Islam, but losing its essence."[93] Gartenstein-Ross, in turn, describes how he was influenced by his transition from Islam to Christianity:

> This was the first time that I had considered that God might love me even though it was a love that I didn't deserve. The idea appealed to me deeply on an emotional level.[94]

In the three autobiographies, the withdrawal from radical Islamist activism has followed a different route, and life after this transition has not necessarily been without complications. The transformation to an 'ordinary' Muslim and an ex-activist does not happen immediately, but involves a kind of transition and identity-building process similar to the one experienced when entering into the radical circles.[95] Uncertainty about the direction and meaning of life creates an instability that can persist for a very long time after withdrawal from activism.[96] This withdrawal is challenging, because the process of activist action may itself have been traumatic; emotions can efficiently enforce and sustain

92 Husain, *The Islamist*, 146.
93 Husain, *The Islamist*, 148.
94 Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 231.
95 See John Horgan, "Deradicalization or Disengagement?," *Perspectives on Terrorism* II, 4 (2008a): 4-8; Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, 12.
96 See Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad*; Husain, *The Islamist*, 177; Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year*, 269.

social activism but, at the same time, activism can be emotionally puzzling.[97]

Final Remarks

The motivations for engaging in radical Islamist activism can differ among potential recruits. However, according to the three autobiographies under review in this article, there are several overarching features related to the processes of engagement. The feeling of isolation and disappointment in one's own life and the temptation to encounter the comradeship in the activist group are recurring features. The process of engagement builds upon the emotions of anger and frustration as well as the feeling of having a common mission and the need for emotional support. The charismatic mentors and leaders of activist groups can easily help construct emotional bonds. Yet, the activist way of life described in the narratives shows the significance of the tight personal and social connections on the basis of which the feeling of collective identity of such groups is formed.

The gradual nature of the processes of engagement and disengagement is one of the main characteristics of this form of activism. The three autobiographies illustrate well how the transition to activism has not provided a sudden solution for the subjects' problems. 'Conversion' to this type of activism does not fit into William James' model of 'passive and sudden' religious conversion, which is usually followed by an immediate sense of ease and release of tensions. On the contrary, the autobiographies show how the transition to this type of activism is usually the product of a conscious effort, which would better fit William James' model of 'volitional conversion.' Activism in radical Islamist networks has also caused trouble in the relationships between the authors and their circles of acquaintances, heightening the factors of psychological tension in the subjects' lives.

The autobiographies also describe how the withdrawal from activism follows a similar gradual pattern. At first, activists may begin to have doubts regarding their actions and ideological goals: emotional emptiness

97 Cf. Disley et al., *Individual Disengagement*, 34-35; Horgan, "Deradicalization or Disengagement?," 4-5.

or meaninglessness follows. Actions no longer seem to be meaningful, and no longer provide the emotional basis for existence. The activist's life is socially limited, effectively preventing him or her from, for example, ordinary social relations or from the basis needed to start a family.

In understanding radical Islamist activism, it is important to realise that people who are engaged with radical political movements do not necessarily have extremist views on society, politics or religion. Extremist views tend to increase in the course of engagement and then, in the course of voluntary disengagement from the radical activist circles, they tend to decrease. This means that the motivational aspects of activism are not inescapably related to strong political opinions or a tendency to extreme views; a sufficient condition for activism is that the social and religious background of a potential recruit is 'suitable enough,' combined with the aspiration to change one's style of life. Therefore, the motivation to activism is a relational construction between a recruit and a movement rather than the individual quality of a potential activist.