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The journeys of former extremists

1. A guide to using the films in schools and colleges.

Watch the four films. Click on this link:

<http://connectfutures.org/formers/>

[Key words #curriculum #extremism #teachers #criticalthinking #safespaces #formers #Britishvalues #Ofsted](#)

- The Leader - Nigel
- The Recruiter - Yasmin
- The Believer - Shahid
- The Accidental - Sammy
- Community advocate -Faizal
- Yazidi Activist - Rozin

Who better to hear from other than those who have been there and done that? What insights can former extremists offer to us? Why should we listen to those who have been part of violent extremist movements? The unique films produced by ConnectFutures capture the journeys of former extremists and political activists (Islamist and far right). There is a 10 minute video which intertwines the stories of four former extremists and two political activists, and also separate 4 minute videos of the testimonies of each of the four former extremists in more detail.

The aim of the films is for people to listen to their voices and understand the processes of radicalisation. The films are a preventative tool to help stop people joining extremist groups. They are also a means of starting difficult conversations about motivation, ideology, religion and identity. The films are visually striking and draw power from personal experience. They provide honest opinions and insights into those questions that the wider public and even governments are often afraid to discuss openly.

One aim of the films is to show that 'extremists' come from a variety of backgrounds, and there is no one pathway in or out. Also the films aim to show that extremists are not all evil ignorant terrorists, but have noble missions of saving their society or improving their world. The formers in these films are articulate and well-intentioned. Hence the aim is to show that we all could become vulnerable.



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2. Brief information on the four formers and two community activists in the films

(Background information about the extremist organisations/causes is given at the end of this guide)

Nigel – The Leader

Nigel, based in London, became a leading far-right activist from the age of 16, having been recruited outside his school and being attracted to the anti-IRA rhetoric. He joined the National Front in 1982 and during the 1990s he was a national council member for the violent neo-Nazi group *Combat 18*. It cost him his marriage: his wife, who despised the extreme political path her husband chose, gave Nigel a “them or me” ultimatum. He chose the far right. Nigel is now active in combatting extremism.

Yasmin – The Recruiter

Yasmin, originally from Derby, was a member of the banned group *Al Muhajiroun* from 1996 to 2000. Her role was to recruit other women to join the extremist organisation in their aim to create an Islamic State. Yasmin now works to dissuade young people from joining extremist groups.

Shahid – The Believer

Shahid, based in Birmingham, was part of the Lynx street gang fighting skinheads in the 1980's. He travelled to Bosnia as an aid worker in the 1990's, but soon joined the foreign fighters brigade of the Bosnian Army after seeing the plight of the people, subsequently travelling to Afghanistan and Kashmir. In 1998, he was arrested and tortured into signing a false confession in Yemen and sentenced to 5 years in prison on charges of conspiring to carry out terrorist attacks. He was released in 2003. He is now active in combating racism, extremism and gang activity.

Sammy - The Accidental

Sammy is a 23 year old German who converted to Islam in 2007 when it 'made his heart beat', and he travelled to Syria in 2014. He thought he was going to 'help' Muslims but on arrival in Syria was only given three options, all of which involved using bombs or being on the frontline. He realised this was just a terrorist organisation. With the help of his family, he escaped and has now returned to Germany.

Rozin - Yazidi Activist

Rozin is a Yazidi activist, born in Iraqi Kurdistan but now living in Coventry. She belongs to a Kurdish minority group, the Yazidis, an object of genocide by ISIS. At aged 10, she fled Sinjar with her family after it was bombed by Al Qaeda. Her global petition on *change.org* asking for Yazidi protection from



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ISIS was signed by nearly 300,000 people and was presented to the UK parliament. Rozin is currently a university student studying law, human rights and social justice and hopes to become a lawyer.

Faizal – Community Advocate

Faizal is a community activist who works with young Muslims. He currently works as a photographer and filmmaker, designing projects that help young Muslims explore and develop their identity here in the UK.

3. Teachers/Adults: Using the videos in the classroom

Firstly, depending on the previous learning experiences of the students, and where these films fit in the curriculum, you may want to discuss the notions of 'extremism', 'violent extremism' and 'radicalisation' before the students view the films. Or you may want to do this at the end or at a later stage.

Sometimes it may be better to start the discussion in small groups to enable all views and feelings to be aired.

The choice of questions or topics, and language used to generate discussion, obviously depends on the age of the students. At a session when some secondary school students watched the films, and heard the personal testimony of Shahid, the sorts of questions and comments that they raised revolved around these areas:

- **Joining up:** Why did people join then, and why do people join now?
- **Testimony and change:** feeling amazed that people have put their voices out; humbled by the bravery of the individuals, being able to change their minds; interesting that they went to a place to make a difference, but then the reality was different.
- **Violence:** Is the use of violence ever justified? Did the Former have a background of violence? Was extremism more effective 20 years ago or now? What is the impact?
- **Complexity:** Realisation that not all journeys are the same; is there a false divide between being a freedom fighter and terrorist?
- **Responsibility:** Who has the responsibility for young people [not] joining extremist groups? Parents or school? Is it not down to schools to help you think before you make a decision? Or has the damage already been done?
- **Reintegration:** What should happen to returning foreign fighters? Should they be criminalised?
- **Looking back:** Did the Former have regrets? Did s/he wish they had never seen the video, which ignited his anger and propelled him to go and fight? Hence questions of fate, and whether events and actions are preordained.

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Questions therefore which could be asked in class:

1. What stands out for you from the videos? What sentence, phrase, idea?
2. Did anything surprise you?
3. Why do you think people join extremist movements? Is this the same for all types of extremism?
4. What techniques do radicalisers use to persuade people into their cause?
5. Could you be tempted to join? What would stop you?
6. What were the triggers for stepping away from extremism? Can people change? Can they really ever be 'formers'?
7. Can we 'forgive' Nigel, in that, unlike Sammy, he was actually involved in violent acts?
8. Are those that join extremist groups so really different from us?
9. If you thought that someone you knew was starting to be radicalised, to join up with an extremist group, what would you do? What should a teacher do?
10. How could schools make all students resilient to extremism? What creative ideas do you have?

You may want to show the films twice – once to get a general reaction and a response to various questions, and then to ask students to focus on key themes, such as all the different reasons why people join up (e.g. frustration, lack of voice, feeling of exclusion, duty to help other Muslims, the holy war, create a revolution, not being believed, seeking justice, becoming God's representative, the social side etc). You may want to extract and highlight certain quotations, for example:

- *"In Syria I was given three options "drive by car into humans..(with) bombs,..second was to fight on the front line and third was to fight with a bomb belt"*
- *"Once a Nazi, always a Nazi"*
- *"We wanted to create a revolution, we wanted to make history..this was the first organisation where women were becoming activists"*
- *"I'd still describe myself as an Islamist"*
- *The British people have been so helpful in my campaign...you have to tell the government again and again what you want*
- *We feel that we need to be consulted/..the Muslims over the last years have not been consulted (by Government)*



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4. Curriculum Links

The films could be used as part of various aspects of curriculum.

History: examination of conflict or propaganda; links to Hitler, the Holocaust, other genocides. Questions of who narrates history, whose stories prevail. People wanting to create history, start a revolution.

SMSC and PSHE: stereotyping and the spread of racism or hatred

Citizenship: Eliciting students' creative ideas on how the sense of mission in these extremists and in young people could be channeled into something positive (this was suggested by some of the former extremists).

Link to Fundamental British Values: values of respect, tolerance, rule of law, liberty, democracy, freedom of speech can all be touched upon.

- *Freedom of speech:* Difference between freedom of speech and hate speech
- *Tolerance and liberty:* Should you ever try to persuade anyone to convert to your cause? Your political group? Your religion?
- *Democracy and rule of law:* how do you create social change without violence? Is violence ever justified? How do you include everyone in the political process, and hear minority views?
- *Rights:* What rights are being infringed in the pursuit of violent extremism?

Religious Education: The appeal of different religions; questions of forgiveness and redemption. Should you try to change people's religion? Is missionary work in other countries justified? Holy wars; religious duties to help.

5. Background to the organisations and causes espoused by the contributors to the films

The international armed conflict in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (BiH) between 1992 and 1995 was part of the breakup of Yugoslavia. The multi-ethnic Socialist Republic of BiH had passed a referendum for independence that gained international recognition. This was rejected by the Bosnian Serbs, who mobilised their forces inside BiH to secure Serb territory, spreading into war. The war was characterized by bitter fighting, indiscriminate shelling of cities,



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ethnic cleansing of Muslims and systematic rape. Events such as the Siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica Massacre later became iconic of the conflict.

Combat 18 is an ultra right wing violent group. The '18' represents Adolf Hitler's initials, and the group is linked to the Nazi *Blut und Ehre* (Blood and Honour) organisation. They demand a white motherland. COMBAT 18 originally started in the early Nineties and was the first right-wing group in the UK to take the state head-on, entirely rejecting conventional politics. The group had promised a violent race war against "invading" immigrants and a system which it believed had abandoned working-class "white" people. This group is still very active and Nigel claims is trying to recruit teachers in Birmingham. Those teachers who 'fall under the spell' of the far right are given a simple guide to winning over pupils in their care. They are trained to ask nationalistic questions in classrooms, then feign ignorance about the answers.

Al Muhajiroun (ALM) is a Salafist jihadist organisation, banned in 2010, and now operating under different aliases. Michael Adebelaajo, the man who killed Fusilier Lee Rigby, attended ALM meetings and demos. It was founded in 1983 by Omar Bakri after an internal schism of the pan-Islamic organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), and with British born co-founder Anjem Choudary, officially declaring it as an dependent organisation in 1996. Whereas HT desired only to establish the Khilafah (the creation of an Islamic state under sharia law) in Muslim countries, Bakri and Choudary wanted to establish it worldwide by twinning Daw'ah (the call to Islam) and Jihad (struggle). ALM has a long history of anti-Semitism, also preaching hatred of Sikhs and Hindus, as well as gays. It is estimated that 18% of Islamist related terrorist convictions are of ALM members, including the Royal Wootton Bassett bomb plot.

Yazidis (or Yezidis) are a Kurdish speaking people who live principally in northern Iraq. They now number approximately 700,000. They are mostly a poor and oppressed people, but they have a rich spiritual tradition that they contend is the world's oldest, given the antiquity of their calendar which can be traced back 6756. The population has dwindled considerably over the course of the past century. Like other minority religions of the region, such as the Druze and the Alawis, it is not possible to convert to Yazidism, only to be born into it. Yazidis have for centuries been under constant attack from those Muslims who claim that the Yazidi's principal deity, Tawsy Melek, the "Peacock Angel", is Satan, and that the Yazidis are not "People of the Book", i.e., that they do not have a sacred revealed scripture like the Holy Bible or the Koran at the centre of their religion. The Yazidis had been denounced as infidels by **Al-Qaeda** in Iraq, a predecessor of Isis, which sanctioned their indiscriminate killing. Since 2014, when the Yazidis were attacked by ISIS, many thousands of Yazidi men have been murdered and thousands of Yazidi women have been kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery.



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WATCH: Want to watch the five films? Click on this link:

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Notes

The inspiration for the films came from a previous larger EU project called '[Formers and Families](#)', where former extremists and their family members were interviewed about their backgrounds. ConnectFutures provided the UK sample, interviewing ten formers extremists and their families (3 Far Right and 7 Islamist)**. The aim of the project was to establish whether there were patterns in the family backgrounds which would help understand vulnerability to radicalisation. The project confirmed however that the routes into extremism were highly complex and individualized, and that it was not possible to attribute responsibility specifically to families. Nonetheless, many insights emerged from the research, about triggers for radicalisation and reasons for joining and leaving. For these former extremists, neither school nor church/mosque seemed protective. We feel that their stories can be used by schools now to try to surface controversial issues and build resilience.

***Crowdfunder: 92 amazing people raised just under £9,000 in March 2015 to enable the filming of individuals.**

It builds upon ConnectFuture's previous EU research project on UK [Formers and Families of Violent Extremists](#) published in November 2015, but features different individuals.

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