
Affective Disengagement and Gendered Agency: Women's Pathways out of Jihadist Radicalization in Morocco

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Abstract

This article examines women's pathways out of jihadist radicalization in Morocco through the concept of affective disengagement, defined as the gradual erosion of the emotional and moral energies that sustain militant commitment. Drawing on eight life-story interviews with six Moroccan women involved in jihadist networks, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to trace how commitment weakens over time. The findings demonstrate that disengagement does not typically begin with doctrinal repudiation. Rather, it unfolds through a slow recalibration of affective orientations—trust, fervor, moral urgency—that once rendered participation meaningful. Ethical contradictions between ideals of justice and lived experiences of violence, surveillance, gendered subordination, and deprivation generate fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion. These affective processes progressively deplete attachment before explicit ideological doubt emerges. At the same time, disengagement is not merely subtractive. Women re-anchor their moral worlds around care, relational obligation, and survival within systems of male guardianship and social surveillance, producing forms of partial disengagement rather than total rupture. By integrating insights from affect theory, moral injury scholarship, and feminist analyses of agency, the article reframes disengagement as a relational and gendered sociomoral transformation. It challenges ideology-first models of exit and suggests that durable disengagement depends not only on cognitive change but on the reconstruction of affective attachment and morally livable futures within constrained social environments.

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Introduction

In the past two decades, Morocco has experienced several waves of mobilization linked to transnational jihadist movements, from the Casablanca attacks of 2003 to the recruitment flows toward ISIS-controlled territory in the mid-2010s. While most scholarly and policy analyses have centered on men, women have played heterogeneous roles—as spouses, logistical intermediaries, would-be migrants, ideological participants, and, in some cases,

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members of operational cells (Bloom, 2011; Cook & Vale, 2018; Ennaji, 2016). Yet little is known about how these women interpret their involvement, how their commitments evolve over time, or how they gradually withdraw from militant milieus once the moral and affective coherence sustaining these worlds begins to erode. Existing studies on female radicalization and women's involvement in jihadist networks in North Africa remain limited in number and scope, often framed through security-oriented logics or institutional deradicalization programs (Ennaji, 2016; Jamal, 2018; Masbah & Ahmadoun, 2019; Renard & Wölkner, 2019), and seldom attentive to the lived, subjective, and gendered texture of disengagement.

This article examines the post-radicalization trajectories of six Moroccan women involved, at different moments and in distinct ways, in jihadist networks. Through an interpretive and phenomenological approach, it asks: How do these women understand the gradual weakening of their emotional, moral, and relational commitments to jihadist projects? What processes shape this affective erosion, and how are these processes inflected by gendered obligations, ethical contradictions, and everyday practices of care, stigma, and male guardianship? These questions are especially salient in the Moroccan context, where state-led initiatives such as the Mousalaha program have sought to address extremism through religious re-education and managed reintegration, even as the subjective and relational dynamics that precede or exceed such interventions remain little understood (Masbah, 2015; Jamal, 2018; Masbah & Ahmadoun, 2019; Dalhoum, 2020; Renard & Wölkner, 2019).

A central concept guiding this inquiry is *affective disengagement*—the slow weakening of emotional intensities, moral energies, and relational attachments that undergird involvement in extremist milieus. In this article, affective disengagement refers to the weakening of emotional and moral attachment to militant projects. Its distinction from cognitive and behavioral forms of disengagement is elaborated in the theoretical framework. An individual, for instance, may be behaviorally engaged in extremist practices while affectively disengaged, or they may disengage behaviorally while retaining their extremist beliefs (Horgan, 2009). Disentangling these different processes is essential to making sense of the disengagement trajectories of women, which are characterized by ambivalence, relational constraint, and partial reorientation.

Although the term of affective disengagement appears across studies of cult exit (Skonovd, 1983; Wright, 1987), political Islam (Wiktorowicz, 2005), and violent extremism

(Horgan, 2009; Altier et al., 2017), it remains descriptive and rarely theorized in relation to women's experiences, moral worlds, or the relational infrastructures that give extremist commitments their force. By tracing how affective intensities diminish, how ethical contradictions accumulate, and how gendered responsibilities reorient priorities, this study argues that disengagement is best understood as a gradual, morally saturated, and relational process rather than a sharp cognitive reversal or discrete ideological rupture.

The article makes three contributions to the study of disengagement and deradicalization. First, while previous research has noted that emotional strain may accompany disengagement (Altier et al., 2014; Altier et al., 2017; Simi et al., 2019; Bouhana, 2019), this article demonstrates that emotional weakening is not a secondary effect but a constitutive, early dynamic of exit. The data show that fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion operate within gendered moral worlds and often precede explicit cognitive doubt, gradually destabilizing earlier fervor. Second, it shows that disengagement unfolds within dense moral worlds: women do not necessarily renounce religious ideals but confront lived realities that introduce ethical contradictions, rendering earlier commitments increasingly untenable. Third, it foregrounds gendered agency as central to shaping disengagement trajectories. The interplay between care, pregnancy, male guardianship, and structural precarity produces situated modes of navigation that differ markedly from gender-neutral or masculinized models of exit.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on eight life-story interviews with six women conducted between 2019 and 2022 in Morocco and, in one case, with a Moroccan woman in Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach allows the article to attend to the affective and moral textures of participants' narratives, examining how they articulate shifts in commitment, interpret ethical tensions, and make sense of their evolving responsibilities and vulnerabilities. All interviews were pseudonymized, translated from Darija (Moroccan vernacular language) into English, and analyzed with particular attention to lived experience and meaning-making.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical background and analytic framework, tracing how affective disengagement has appeared across adjacent literatures and situating the concept within affective, moral, and gendered dimensions. The methodology then details the study's interpretive and phenomenological design. The findings

section analyzes the two interrelated themes that emerged across the six trajectories: (1) affective erosion and moral fatigue, and (2) the reweaving of moral worlds through care, male guardianship, and partial reorientation. The discussion situates these insights within broader debates on disengagement, and the conclusion reflects on their implications for deradicalization practice, reintegration, and future research on gendered pathways out of extremism.

Theoretical Background and Framework

The term *affective disengagement* appears across several strands of scholarship, yet it is often used in a descriptive rather than fully theorized way. Research on cult exit, political Islam, affect theory, moral injury, and violent extremism (VE) has documented processes of emotional weakening, relational distancing, and the gradual erosion of commitment. However, these literatures tend to give less sustained attention to how such processes unfold over time, how they are situated within moral worlds, or how they are shaped by gendered forms of labor and obligation. Building on these existing insights, this article seeks to further clarify how affective disengagement can be understood as an analytic lens, and to explore how it nuances prevailing models of disengagement, with particular attention to women's trajectories out of jihadist networks in Morocco.

Early articulations of dynamics akin to affective disengagement emerge in scholarship on new religious movements and cultic exit. Skonovd's (1983) classic typology introduces "disaffection" as a gradual cooling of emotional commitment that weakens a movement's hold on members. Wright's later work on defection narratives refines this idea by depicting "disaffection, or affective disengagement" as the slow withdrawal of emotional investment triggered by disappointment with leaders, hypocrisy, unfulfilled promises, or interpersonal conflict (Wright, 1987).

Stein, in her study (2017), drawing on cult literature, has argued that loyalty, dependency, and moral commitment can create bonds that tie people to authoritarian groups even in the presence of contradiction and abuse. Her analysis underscores how emotional attachment can sustain commitment long after doubts and contradictions emerge, and how the

weakening of those bonds may represent a key factor and a critical stage in the disengagement process.

A more explicit use of the term appears in studies of political Islam, especially work on defection from the Muslim Brotherhood. In his processual account of exit, Menshawy (2020) identifies “affective disengagement” as a key micro-level stage characterized by emotional and psychological detachment from the organization’s social world. El-Said and Harrigan (2014) similarly show how frustration, disappointment, and internal conflicts can erode commitment among rank-and-file members before any explicit ideological break. Yet it remains largely gender-blind. Women appear as contextual figures—wives, sisters, or supporters—rather than as subjects whose emotional attachments are shaped by distinct moral worlds and gendered forms of responsibility.

A third body of scholarship, affect theory, provides conceptual tools for distinguishing between *emotions*—socially recognizable feelings such as fear, shame, or disappointment—and *affective intensities* understood as background currents of energy, orientation, or attunement that shape how individuals attach to, or withdraw from, particular worlds (Massumi, 2002; Ahmed, 2004). This work highlights how shifts in attachment often begin as subtle changes in affective tone—waning excitement, dulling trust, growing heaviness—before they are named as doubt, disillusionment, or remorse. These insights are directly relevant to militant settings: fervor and devotion may erode long before militants articulate cognitive disagreement.

Foundational VE work has prioritized cognitive, behavioral, or structural drivers of disengagement (Horgan & Taylor, 2001; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009), with emotions often relegated to background context. More recent studies, however, point toward affective erosion as a critical dynamic. Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan (2017) identify recurring affective drivers of disengagement—burnout, disillusionment, unmet expectations—among long-term militants. Drawing on life histories of U.S. right-wing extremists, Simi et al. (2019) show how anger, shame, guilt, remorse, and exhaustion are tightly entangled with social ties in ways that can both sustain and weaken commitment. Van der Heide and Huurman (2016) explicitly draw parallels between cult exit and extremist disengagement, highlighting the role of emotional loosening in the decision to “quit.” Yet these contributions remain dispersed, and affective weakening is typically addressed under adjacent labels—strain, burnout,

disillusionment—rather than integrated into a coherent conceptualization of affective disengagement.

Recent research in P/CVE has also highlighted the importance of identity transformation in disengagement. The Phoenix Model conceptualizes disengagement as a process of identity reconstruction, through which individuals gradually move away from extremist groups (Silke, Morrison, Maiberg, Slay, & Stewart, 2021). This model focuses on identity transformation, while affective disengagement shows that transformation is often preceded by a more subtle process. Thus, before new identities are formed, the emotional and moral commitments that defined militant belonging disintegrate.

Adjacent literatures on moral injury and moral experience offer additional resources for thinking through the moral texture of affective disengagement. Anthropological analyses of ethical contradiction and moral breakdown (Zigon, 2007; Fassin, 2012) highlight how moral life is relational and embodied, and how repeated encounters with contradiction can gradually render a moral world less livable. Despite their relevance, moral frameworks remain marginal in VE scholarship, even though extremist commitments are intensely moralized and often organized around ideals of purity, honor, duty, or divine reward.

Emerging research in the P/CVE field nonetheless points to the role of moral emotions in shaping post-exit trajectories. Meredith and Horgan (2024), for example, show how shame, guilt, and distress frequently accompany the period following disengagement from violent extremism, as former participants confront the moral implications of past involvement. Their findings reinforce the idea that disengagement is not only a strategic or ideological shift but also a deeply emotional process in which individuals must renegotiate their relationship to responsibility, harm, and moral accountability.

Gender-focused research on violent extremism has grown substantially, documenting women's roles, motivations, and vulnerabilities across a range of movements (Fink, Zeiger & Bhulai, 2016; Pearson, 2017; Vidino & Hughes, 2015). In North Africa and the broader SWANA region, scholarship has begun to trace women's involvement in jihadist networks and state responses (Ennaji, 2016; Jamal, 2018; Masbah & Ahmadoun, 2019; Renard & Wölkner, 2019). However, much of this work remains policy-oriented, centered on security, risk, and reintegration, and tends to address women's trajectories primarily through institutional categories (recruitment, radicalization, returnees). The emotional, relational, and

moral dimensions of their paths into and out of militant worlds are often treated as background context rather than as central analytic concerns. As a result, we know relatively little about how women experience the slow erosion of fervor, the accumulation of ethical contradictions, or the reconfiguration of their moral worlds as they disengage.

Affective weakening is widely acknowledged as part of disengagement, but its underlying dynamics—especially its moral texture, relational embeddedness, and gendered specificity—remain under-theorized.

In this article, affective disengagement refers to the gradual erosion of the emotional, moral, and relational attachments through which a militant project is experienced as compelling, legitimate, and worth sustaining. It concerns a transformation in affective orientation: trust becomes suspicion, fervor becomes fatigue, devotion becomes burden, and moral urgency gives way to ambivalence, shame, or exhaustion. This process may precede, accompany, or even occur without full ideological renunciation.

This differs from cognitive deradicalization, which refers more specifically to changes in belief, doctrine, worldview, or justificatory reasoning. A person may begin to question theological interpretations, reject violence as legitimate, or revise their political understanding of jihadist action without yet detaching emotionally from the movement. Conversely, emotional attachment may erode before individuals can clearly articulate doctrinal disagreement. In such cases, the militant worldview may remain partially intact at the level of discourse even as its affective force diminishes.

Affective disengagement also differs from behavioral disengagement, understood as withdrawal from violent action, clandestine participation, logistical support, recruitment, or other forms of operational involvement. Behavioral withdrawal may result from imprisonment, surveillance, family pressure, motherhood, fatigue, or lack of opportunity, without necessarily entailing either ideological change or emotional detachment. Likewise, individuals may remain behaviorally entangled in a movement while privately experiencing deep affective erosion.

The framework guiding this article conceptualizes affective disengagement as a gradual, relational, and morally saturated process through which individuals' affective attachments to extremist projects weaken over time. It is not synonymous with institutional "deradicalization," nor with a full cognitive rejection of ideology, nor with simple behavioral

non-participation. Individuals may remain publicly aligned with a group, continue to voice some ideological commitments, or be unable to exit for legal, economic, or familial reasons, while nonetheless undergoing a profound erosion of trust, fervor, and moral resonance. Affective disengagement, as used here, names that erosion: a shift in how group members feel *with* and *for* the movement, and in how livable its moral world remains for them.

This framework rests on three interlinked dimensions: affective processes, moral worlds, and gendered agency. First, building on affect theory, it distinguishes between discrete emotions and broader affective orientations. Affective disengagement involves shifts in these orientations: fervor becomes fatigue; devotion dulls into obligation; trust is replaced by suspicion or indifference. These changes can be uneven and reversible, and they often precede articulated doubt or explicit ideological dissent. Focusing on affective orientations rather than only on named emotions allows us to trace how women's attachment to jihadist projects is gradually depleted—how they continue to perform expected roles while feeling increasingly detached, numb, or burdened.

Second, drawing on work in moral injury and the anthropology of ethics, the framework situates affective disengagement within moral worlds understood as relational, situated, and embodied. Jihadist commitments are not only strategic or ideological; they are lived as moral projects grounded in ideals of piety, sacrifice, and care for the Umma. Disengagement, in this view, is driven by the accumulation of ethical contradictions and perceived betrayals: the gap between promised justice and witnessed brutality, between claims of spiritual purity and experiences of corruption, between ideals of sisterhood and practices of control or abandonment. These contradictions generate moral fatigue, remorse, and disillusionment that reshape how actors evaluate their past actions and future obligations. Affective disengagement thus entails not just “feeling bad” but a deep reweighing of what counts as right, bearable, or divinely sanctioned.

Third, the framework foregrounds gendered agency. Feminist scholarship emphasizes that agency is not reducible to individual choice but is exercised through situated practices shaped by power, constraint, and obligation (Butler, 1997; Mahmood, 2005). Women's emotional commitments to jihadist milieus are embedded in gendered forms of labor (emotional, domestic, and reproductive), kinship duties, marital hierarchies, and male guardianship. Their affective disengagement is therefore entangled with the demands of care

for children, parents, and spouses; with experiences of control and violence; and with the anticipation of stigma or abandonment upon exit. By foregrounding gendered agency, the framework attends to how women navigate these constraints, reconfigure their responsibilities, and carve out partial or covert forms of disengagement even when full departure is not immediately possible.

By bringing these dimensions together, the article treats affective disengagement not as a discrete turning point but as a slow, uneven erosion of emotional, moral, and relational ties. This reframing complicates sequential models that privilege cognitive shifts or structural opportunities as the primary drivers of disengagement, and instead highlights how affective erosion, moral injury, and gendered agency interact over time. The framework provides the analytic scaffolding for interpreting six life-story trajectories of Moroccan women involved in jihadist networks, tracing how affective attachments were forged, how they were strained, and how they eventually eroded.

Methodology

This article draws on qualitative research conducted between 2019 and 2022 with six Moroccan women who had been involved—at different moments and in different ways—in jihadist networks. The objective was to understand how they make sense of their experiences of radicalization, disillusionment, and affective disengagement, and how gendered expectations, moral contradictions, and relational pressures shaped the slow erosion of their commitment. Given the deeply subjective, morally charged, and often traumatic nature of these trajectories, the study adopted an interpretive, phenomenological methodology grounded in life-story interviewing and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

IPA is well suited to the study of disengagement processes because it prioritizes individuals' lived experience, their interpretations of change over time, and the evolving meanings of emotionally charged events (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009; Smith 2004). Its emphasis on depth and temporal situatedness enables a fine-grained analysis of how attachments gradually weaken, often in fragmented, ambiguous, and non-linear ways, which closely aligns with this article's focus on affective disengagement as an experiential process rather than a primarily ideological rupture.

Epistemological Orientation

The research is situated within an interpretive, phenomenological tradition that prioritizes how people make sense of their actions and experiences over time. Rather than treating involvement in jihadist milieus as the linear outcome of ideology, psychological traits, or purely structural constraints, the analysis centers on how women narrate shifting emotional investments, moral tensions, gendered obligations, and transformations in faith. A phenomenological stance was therefore essential for attending to lived experience: not only what happened, but how it was felt, inhabited, and retrospectively interpreted.

Within this orientation, IPA provided the methodological backbone. IPA is well suited to sensitive, small-N studies because it values depth over breadth and operates through a “double hermeneutic”: participants interpret their own worlds, and the researcher, in turn, interprets those interpretations. The aim was not to generate generalizable claims about all Moroccan women involved in jihadist networks, but to produce a thick, situated account of the experiential textures, moral logics, and affective shifts unfolding within six trajectories.

Research Design and Access

Access to women formerly associated with jihadist networks in Morocco is highly constrained. Some participants were former detainees; others remained under informal surveillance or community scrutiny; and one was interviewed remotely from al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. No formal institutional channels were available, and recruitment therefore relied on personal and professional networks, mostly proceeding through snowball sampling.

Initial contact was established through journalists, lawyers, activists, and male former detainees familiar with terrorism-related cases. These connections led to two initial interlocutors implicated in a jihadist plot, and subsequently to four additional participants. In total, eight in-depth life-story interviews were conducted with six women, ranging from fifty-three minutes to just over three hours. Interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants—including private homes, quiet public spaces, or secure online platforms such as Telegram for the Moroccan woman in al-Hol—in order to maximize comfort and safety. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been modified or removed.

The six trajectories were deliberately heterogeneous, allowing for analytic contrast rather than representativeness: two adolescents involved in a planned attack at fourteen; a returnee from ISIS-held territory; a woman arrested shortly before departure; a core member of an all-women cell; and a woman remaining in al-Hol. This diversity made it possible to explore how affective intensities, gender norms, faith, and social constraints operated across distinct biographical configurations.

Table 1
Interviewed women: age at the time of interview, date, duration, and interview setting

Pseudonym	Age at the time of interview	Interview date(s)	Duration of interview(s)	Interview setting
Ikram	Two interviews: 29 and 32 years old	April 2019 and April 2022	3 h 05 min and 2 h 12 min	Public setting (urban area)
Samira	Two interviews: 29 and 32 years old	April 2019 and April 2022	2 h 49 min and 2 h 12 min	Public setting (urban area)
Siham	25 years old	April 2019	1 h 21 min	Private residence (urban area)
Kelthoum	35 years old	November 2019	53 min	Public setting (urban area)
Amira	34 years old	August 2022	2 h 18 min	Private residence (semi-urban area)
Jihane	35 years old	December 2021 and additional dates	Multiple audio exchanges	Encrypted digital platforms

Ethical Considerations

At the time of fieldwork, institutional ethical review procedures for qualitative social science research were not formally established or accessible within my university context. Consequently, the study was conducted following internationally recognized principles of ethical qualitative research, including voluntary informed consent, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and trauma-informed practice. Before each interview, participants were

informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the steps taken to protect confidentiality. Consent was treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-time transaction.

Emotional safety shaped the pace and structure of each conversation. Silences and refusals were respected; sensitive topics were approached gradually and only when participants indicated willingness to elaborate; visible distress prompted a pause, a change of topic, or the option to stop entirely unless participants explicitly chose to continue. Particular care was taken when discussing detention, separation, and experiences of violence. No incentives were offered that could exert undue influence on participation.

Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent. When recording was not possible, particularly in the case of the interview conducted with the participant in al-Hol camp, detailed notes were taken during or immediately after the conversation.

All files and transcripts were stored on encrypted devices with restricted access. Geographic, familial, and procedural identifiers were systematically anonymized, given the ongoing legal, social, and security risks attached to women associated with jihadist networks. In certain cases, full anonymity could not be guaranteed due to participants' public visibility and media exposure. These participants explicitly expressed comfort with being recognized and did not request anonymity. Nevertheless, care was taken to avoid the amplification of personal details beyond what is already publicly available, and analytical focus remained on structural and affective processes rather than on identifiable biographical specifics.

Given the sensitivity of the research context and the potential risks involved, particular attention was also paid to the researcher's safety. Interviews were conducted in locations judged to be secure and discreet, and communication channels were chosen to minimize surveillance risks. Situational risk assessments were conducted continuously throughout the fieldwork process.

Life-Story Interviewing

Life-story interviewing was chosen because disengagement from extremist involvement is not a definite event, but a temporal, relational, and affective process unfolding across the life course. Life-story methods are particularly suited to capturing how individuals retrospectively organize experiences of change, rupture, and reinterpretation over time

(Atkinson, 1998; Bertaux, 1981; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Riessman, 2008). This approach allowed participants to situate their involvement within broader life trajectories that included childhood and family histories, gendered expectations, educational constraints, marital relationships, religious transformations, and encounters with security and judicial institutions. A flexible thematic guide supported the interviews, covering these domains while leaving ample space for participants to organize their narratives in their own ways. This minimized the imposition of external categories and made it possible for meanings to emerge through the language women used to describe moral doubt, affective exhaustion, and the gradual cooling of emotional attachment to jihadist worlds.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Moroccan woman and sociologist working within my own sociocultural context, I entered the field with perspectives shaped by shared linguistic, religious, and gendered norms. This proximity provided important advantages in terms of trust, linguistic nuance, and cultural attunement, while also carrying the risk of over-familiarity or unexamined assumptions.

Reflexivity therefore accompanied all stages of the research. A reflexive journal was maintained to document emotional responses to interviews, moments of resonance or discomfort, and emerging interpretive uncertainties. It also recorded key methodological decisions—when to probe, when to withdraw, and how to respond to distress. Reflexivity was treated not as a moral gesture, but as an analytic discipline aimed at keeping interpretations grounded in participants' accounts rather than in my own projections.

Analytic Strategy

Analysis followed core principles of IPA and unfolded in four iterative stages. Interviews were conducted primarily in Darija (Moroccan vernacular language), with occasional shifts into French or Modern Standard Arabic. For purposes of analysis and dissemination, all materials were translated into English prior to coding. Rather than relying on formal back-translation, I repeatedly returned to the original recordings throughout the analytic process to preserve semantic, moral, and affective nuance—particularly in relation to

religious vocabulary, emotionally charged expressions, idiomatic formulations, and culturally embedded metaphors.

Stage 1 involved close, repeated reading of each transcript to attune to tone, rhythm, silences, and internal tensions. Initial notes captured descriptive content (events), affective registers (feelings and bodily states), and interpretive work (how participants made sense of what occurred).

Stage 2 transformed these notes into more systematic codes marking experiences, emotions, moral reasoning, identity negotiation, and moments of intensification or erosion of commitment. Particular attention was paid to expressions indicating shifts in affective orientation toward the militant milieu—such as descriptions of exhaustion, fear, shame, moral contradiction, or diminished enthusiasm for collective action. These recurring patterns were treated as indicators of affective disengagement when they appeared across narratives and were linked by participants to changes in how they understood their involvement.

Stage 3 grouped codes into experiential themes within each case, remaining close to participants' language while beginning a cautious movement toward conceptual abstraction.

Stage 4 entailed cross-case comparison in order to identify convergences, divergences, and patterned variations, without erasing biographical specificity. The aim was not to measure disengagement as a fixed outcome but to reconstruct how participants themselves narrated the gradual weakening of attachment to militant projects. Interpretations were therefore grounded in repeated engagement with the transcripts and attention to the language through which participants articulated moral tension, relational strain, and emotional fatigue. The final analytic synthesis brought these themes into dialogue with the conceptual focus of the article: affective disengagement, moral tension, emotional exhaustion, and gendered agency.

Throughout the process, I regularly returned to the raw transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained faithful to participants' narratives. Informal discussions with academic peers familiar with qualitative methods and SWANA-based extremism studies were used to test emerging interpretations and identify potential blind spots. These exchanges were not conceived as validation but as a way to strengthen interpretive clarity and methodological modesty.

Limitations

The sample is small and shaped by access constraints, security conditions, and the emotional intensity of the subject matter. These six women cannot be considered representative of all Moroccan women involved in jihadist networks, nor do their trajectories capture the full diversity of such experiences. These limitations are consistent with the study's purpose. The goal was not to generalize, but to provide a thick, situated account of how affective disengagement unfolds as a gendered, relational, and moral process across six distinct life stories.

The translation of interviews from Darija, Arabic, and occasional French terms (e.g., *tutelle*, translated here as “male guardianship”) into English inevitably entailed some loss of nuance. This was addressed through repeated listening, consultation with peers and translators, and careful attention to preserving cultural and affective meaning.

Findings

Affective disengagement across these six trajectories does not take the form of rupture or sudden ideological reversal. It unfolds gradually as a slow, uneven erosion of attachment shaped by shifting affective intensities, accumulating ethical contradictions, and deeply gendered responsibilities. Although the biographies differ—two adolescents involved in a planned attack at fourteen, a returnee from ISIS-held territory, a woman arrested before departure, a core member of an all-women cell, and a woman stranded in al-Hol—two interrelated dynamics organize the findings.

First, militant commitment weakens through a process of affective erosion. Ethical contradictions generate fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion, progressively draining the emotional infrastructure that once sustained engagement. Second, disengagement unfolds as moral re-anchoring. Women reweave their moral worlds around care, relational obligation, and negotiated agency within male guardianship systems. Rather than clean ideological rupture, trajectories culminate in partial reorientation—forms of continuity that allow identity coherence while reconfiguring commitment.

Together, these dynamics show that disengagement is neither purely cognitive nor purely emotional. It is a sociomoral process unfolding within material hardship, relational strain, and gendered constraint.

Theme 1 – Affective Erosion and Moral Fatigue: From Early Fervor to Waning Commitment

This theme traces how disengagement emerges not through dramatic renunciation but through gradual weakening. Early commitment is intense, morally saturated, and emotionally charged. Over time, however, ethical contradictions accumulate. These contradictions generate fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion. The emotional labor required to sustain militant belonging becomes increasingly costly. What erodes first is not belief itself, but the affective energy that made belief feel urgent, necessary, and redemptive.

1.1 Precarious beginnings, moral striving, and the intensification of affect

Across the six trajectories, early engagement does not arise in an emotional vacuum. It builds upon preexisting affective wounds—neglect, humiliation, poverty, gendered devaluation—that shape the moral sensitivity through which jihadist imaginaries resonate. None of these experiences mechanically “cause” radicalization. Rather, they configure the affective and moral grammar through which certain narratives become compelling and emotionally plausible.

Ikram and Samira’s childhood is marked by instability. After their grandmother’s death, they are moved between relatives. Their mother’s intermittent street begging and sex working exposes them to stigma. They describe growing up like strangers to each other, navigating fragile care and public humiliation. In this context, religious intensification becomes a means of dignity reconstruction.

Ikram recalls adopting the khimar to “wash [her] mother’s sins” and to “save [her] image so [she] could move peacefully in the neighborhood.” (Ikram, interview). Piety here is not abstract devotion. It is moral repair within a gendered economy of honor. Being labeled “the beggar’s daughter” shapes how she is seen—and how she sees herself. Hyper-piety offers both shield and elevation.

A similar pattern appears in Siham’s trajectory. She describes long-standing moral exhaustion: “I’m 25, but I feel like I’m 90.” (Siham, interview). The phrase condenses

disappointment, inner conflict, and longing for transcendence. Her religious intensification unfolds gradually: attending lessons, admiring charismatic female preachers—“the way she spoke... she made me love religion” (Siham)—adopting abaya, then long veil, then niqab “little by little.”

These practices generate belonging and recognition. Being called “mujahidat” produces pride and exhilaration. Across cases, early engagement is sustained less by doctrine than by affective intensities—enthusiasm, tenderness from co-believers, the sense of finally being morally seen. The jihadist project feels redemptive because it offers narrative coherence to biographical pain.

Early commitment is therefore affectively dense. That density will later matter. The same emotional saturation that sustains involvement renders it vulnerable once contradictions accumulate.

1.2 Everyday violence, hypocrisy, and the slow accumulation of ethical contradictions

Disengagement rarely begins with theological doubt. It begins with friction—between moral expectation and lived reality. For the twins, a first rupture appears around the Casablanca bombings of May 2003. Initially, they react with exhilaration: “We liked it a lot. We were happy... they did jihad!” (Ikram, interview). But seeing images of torn bodies and grieving families unsettles them deeply. Samira recalls “photos of torn human body parts... a woman who lost her husband and son.” She adds quietly: “If we ever do something, it must not involve innocent people.” (Samira, interview).

The shift is subtle. Jihad as a concept is not rejected. Its embodied consequences become morally troubling. As Siham explained when recalling an early disagreement with a jihad partner:

“He said it was permitted to blow up a liquor store. I told him, ‘No, this is not permitted, this is not licit. Innocent people would die, and it is not licit to kill souls.’ He also spoke about destroying other people’s property. What he said didn’t convince me.” (Siham, interview).

The imagined heroism of violence collides with its intimate devastation. This friction does not immediately dissolve commitment. It introduces drag—an ethical slowing of certainty.

For those who traveled to Syria, contradictions multiply through daily life. Siham initially describes the Caliphate as “paradise on earth.” Yet she also recounts surveillance, restricted mobility, and dependency. Women cannot “go anywhere alone.” (Siham) Widows are pressured into remarriage. Hunger and bombardment puncture utopian promise. Pregnancy intensifies contradiction. Imagining childbirth under bombardment reframes divine trust through vulnerability. The promise of sacred purpose coexists with fear of dying in a foreign land.

Back in Morocco, other contradictions emerge. The twins’ stories are sensationalized by media and fictionalized in a television series produced without their consent. Those once praised as courageous “moujahidate” are now pitied or stigmatized. Ikram compares reintegration support offered to male ex-prisoners with the absence of equivalent attention to her and her sister.

Neither the militant milieu nor state structures appear morally coherent. These contradictions accumulate slowly. Women may continue citing the same religious verses, yet the jihadi emotional resonance that once animated those verses begins to weaken. Ethical contradiction acts as catalyst. Affective erosion names the gradual weakening that follows.

One trajectory, however, complicates this sequence and warrants attention precisely because it does not fit smoothly. When the twins first learned of the Casablanca bombings in May 2003, their immediate reaction was not revulsion but excitement: “We liked it a lot. We were happy... they did jihad!” (Ikram). This is not a case in which ethical friction dampens enthusiasm; rather, it reflects a situation where ethical contradiction coexists with intensified affect. Moral unease and fervor emerge at the same time, rather than in sequence. Samira’s subsequent statement — “If we ever do something, it must not involve innocent people” — indicates the onset of an internal negotiation that unfolds alongside continued commitment, rather than following it.

This recursive dynamic, in which affective erosion and affective intensification operate in parallel rather than in linear succession, suggests that the framework must be able to account for lag structures: periods during which the emotional foundation is simultaneously

being formed and subtly destabilized. The framework does not break down in this instance, but it is sufficiently flexible to include cases where contradictions do not immediately diminish attachment; instead, they accumulate on a foundation that remains, at least temporarily, affectively viable.

1.3 Fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion as vectors of erosion

Across six trajectories, four affective textures recur: fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion. These emotions do not arise in isolation. They emerge in response to ethical contradictions and relational strain, progressively draining attachment.

Fear is rarely framed as fear of state repression. It concerns consequences for bodies and relationships. For Samira, images of dismembered civilians provoke fear of moral implication—fear of becoming responsible for another woman’s grief. She says:

“I saw photos and videos of torn human body parts... a woman who had lost her husband and her son crying. Seeing those images made something break inside me.”
(Samira, interview)

In Syria, Siham and Jihane describe constant bombardment and displacement. Having kids and pregnancy transforms exhilaration into dread. Fear signals a shift from imagined eternity to embodied fragility. As Siham recalled, the experience of pregnancy during bombardments fundamentally altered how she perceived the conflict:

“When I was pregnant, every bombing terrified me. Before, I thought about sacrifice and martyrdom, but once you carry a child, you think differently. You only think about protecting the baby and surviving.” (Siham, interview)

Jihane described how the daily experience of war reshaped the emotional meaning of the journey:

“There were bombings all the time. We had to move from place to place. When you hear the explosions and you have children with you, you realize that this is not what you imagined and you want everything to stop and feel safe again.” (Jihane, interview)

Shame operates across shifting moral audiences. Early piety addresses stigma. Later, post-prison exposure generates new shame. “People talked about us as if we were a spectacle,” Ikram recalls. Or, “my neighbors looks and behavior toward me and my kids have changed,” Kelthoum admits. Shame migrates—from family humiliation to militant notoriety to public scrutiny. It binds and then loosens attachment.

Guilt centers on relational consequences. Women speak of police raids endured by mothers, children mocked at school, financial burdens borne by relatives. Guilt does not primarily concern doctrinal error. It concerns violated obligations of care. It redirects moral energy. As Kelthoum explained:

“What hurt me the most was not what happened to me, but what my family had to go through. The police came to our house, such a scandal! My mother and family had to face the neighbors and family, and my children had to hear things way after what happened.” (Kelthoum)

Exhaustion punctuates nearly every trajectory. One interviewee described this emotional pressure in intensely personal terms:

“I felt like everything was on my shoulders. I had to manage the children, the house, the expectations... Sometimes I felt like all the world’s burdens were on my shoulders. I had enough. I was very, very tired.” (Siham).

Samira described the constant pressure to sustain this emotional commitment despite growing fatigue:

“I had to keep everything together for the children and for the family. Even when things were difficult, I had to show strength. But inside, I was very exhausted.” (Samira)

These are not metaphors of convenience. They capture cumulative depletion. In Syria, widows describe relentless strain under bombardment. In Morocco, women speak of fatigue linked to surveillance and stigma. Exhaustion marks the wearing down of emotional capacity. Together, these affective processes—some crystallizing into recognizable emotions such as shame, fear, and exhaustion—reveal that disengagement is not sudden rebellion but gradual

erosion. The moral and relational infrastructures sustaining commitment weaken under sustained strain.

1.4 The collapse of emotional labor

Militant engagement requires work. Reading texts. Distributing tracts. Debating. Caring for networks. Performing piety. Maintaining vigilance. As Amira recalled, participation demanded constant activity and attention:

“We were always discussing things, reading, sending messages, doing something. There was always something to do, something to explain, someone to support.”
(Amira)

Ikram recalls nights strategizing until she told her sister to “calm down,” wishing they could “stop thinking.” (Ikram, interview). The constant moral mobilization becomes unbearable.

In Syria, women describe managing scarcity, caring for children, tending to wounded neighbors. Jihane described how daily survival responsibilities replaced the ideological excitement that had initially motivated the journey:

“Most of the time we were just trying to get through the day. Finding food, taking care of the children, helping neighbors. It was no longer about what we imagined before.”
(Jihane)

Siham insists: “Even if I don’t have resources, I must help.” (Siham, interview). She adds: “You try to help everyone, but after a while you realize you have nothing left to give.” (Siham). Care anchors identity. But prolonged displacement renders such labor unsustainable. Affective disengagement culminates when emotional costs exceed perceived moral returns. Beliefs may persist, but the infrastructure that animated them collapses. Disengagement here is less explosion than erosion.

Theme 2 – Reweaving Moral Worlds: Gendered Agency, Care, and Partial Reorientation

If Theme 1 traces erosion, Theme 2 examines reconstruction. Disengagement does not leave a vacuum. Women redirect affective investments toward other forms of care, relational

obligation, and survival within gendered constraints. This produces continuity as much as change.

2.1 Care and the recalibration of risk

Care does not simply “add” a new concern to women’s lives; it operates as a rival normative authority that can displace the jihadist project as the primary site of moral obligation. In practice, this means that moral priorities are reordered: what once appeared as an overriding religious duty is progressively weighed against the concrete, everyday demands of protecting and sustaining vulnerable dependents. Siham frames her decision to return through pregnancy, “I had to think of the baby” (Siham), a formulation that condenses a broader recalibration of risk, responsibility, and the limits of endurance. As she explained when recalling that moment:

“When I realized I was pregnant, everything changed. Before, I thought about sacrifice and commitment, even martyrdom. But then I told myself: now I have to think about the baby. I cannot expose the child to this.” (Siham)

Motherhood here is not invoked as sentiment, but as an ethical claim that redefines what can be justified, what must be avoided, and what kind of “good” becomes imaginable under conditions of danger.

The same logic appears in the accounts of Kelthoum, Siham, and Jihane, who articulate comparable shifts in moral orientation. Although their circumstances differ, they similarly describe care obligations—toward unborn children, an existing baby, or children—as the decisive reference point through which they reassess exposure to violence, mobility, and continued involvement. Jihane described how caring for children reshaped how she evaluated danger:

“When you are alone, you can take risks. But when there are children with you, you cannot think the same way anymore. Your first thought is how to protect them.” (Jihane)

What is empirically striking is the consistency of this move: care becomes the language through which exit can be both experienced as morally necessary and narrated as

morally legitimate. Rather than signaling a loss of religiosity, these statements indicate a re-anchoring of moral life in proximate responsibility, where the preservation of life, dignity, and familial continuity comes to outweigh distant collective imaginaries. As Siham put it succinctly:

“Religion teaches you to protect life. When I thought about my child, I understood that staying there was no longer the right thing to do.” (Siham)

2.2 Male guardianship and negotiated agency

Women’s trajectories unfold within entrenched systems of male guardianship, where authority moves from father to uncle to husband. These arrangements do not simply form the social background of their lives; they structure both the pathways into militant engagement and the possibilities of withdrawal. Decisions are rarely experienced as fully autonomous. They are filtered through hierarchies that regulate movement, speech, and legitimacy.

Jihane articulates this constraint pointedly: “A woman is the product of the guardianship system... and she is asked for her opinion or if she could decide?” (Jihane). She continued by describing how this structure shaped everyday decision-making:

“Most of the time, decisions are not really ours. There is always someone who decides before you—your father, your husband, someone from the family. You have to follow even if you think otherwise, and that’s what makes of you a good woman.” (Jihane)

Her words reflect more than personal frustration; they expose a normative order that limits female decisional power. Yet disengagement does not occur outside these constraints—it unfolds through negotiation within them.

Several women describe invoking their children’s needs when seeking to return, framing exit as maternal responsibility rather than ideological doubt. Others recount adopting the language of repentance before relatives or authorities, performing culturally legible roles and codes—tired mother, responsible daughter—to secure room for maneuver. Kelthoum described how presenting herself as remorseful helped reopen communication with relatives:

“I told them I regret, that I understood my mistake and that I just wanted to live quietly and take care of my children. I told them I regret and that all I wanted was for

things to return to what they used to be before, for things to be calmer and easier for all of us to live and carry on with life.” (Kelthoum)

Agency here is neither sovereign nor absent. As Ikram explained, decisions were rarely experienced as fully independent: “You try to make your own choices, but you always have to think about how the family will react and what people will say.” (Ikram). Agency operates within narrow corridors shaped by surveillance, economic precarity, and gendered expectation. Affective erosion becomes consequential only when it can be translated into action through such negotiated performances. Jihane summarized this dynamic: “You cannot just decide and leave. You have to find a way that is acceptable, that people will accept.” (Jihane).

2.3 Partial disengagement and moral continuity

Disengagement in these trajectories rarely takes the form of total ideological rupture. Rather than narrating a clean break, women describe a gradual and selective reorientation. Certain practices and risks are rejected, while aspects of moral language and religious reference are retained and reworked.

Samira makes this distinction explicit: “It wasn’t jihad we rejected... it was what they did.” She clarified this distinction when reflecting on the experience: “What disappointed us was not the idea itself. It was what people were doing in its name.” (Samira). The form of this statement is noteworthy. Samira does not reject jihad as a category; she retains it as a moral signifier while removing its violent referent. This is not rhetorical hedging, but a specific form of identity work. By separating a concept from its enactment, Samira is able to narrate exit without narrating self-annihilation. To say “we rejected what they did” is to preserve a prior self — the self who held the ideal — while rejecting the social world that claimed to embody it. The militant framework is maintained as aspiration while being emptied out in practice.

This also helps clarify the mechanism of partial disengagement outlined in Theme 1. Affective erosion does not require the collapse of ideological vocabulary; it requires that this vocabulary be detached from the behaviors and community that once sustained it. Samira can retain “jihad” as a term that continues to signify justice, resistance, or spiritual striving precisely because it has been separated from the lived, relational context in which she

encountered its violent enactment. The ideal persists because it has been abstracted from those who enacted it. This is not residual militancy, but a minimal condition for maintaining narrative coherence after exit.

As Ikram explained: “You cannot erase that part of your life. It is part of your life and of who you are, but you learn to see it differently.” (Ikram).

Siham offers a similar configuration. She recalls her early months in Syria as marked by baraka and solidarity, memories that she does not entirely repudiate. Yet when she speaks of a good life today, she centers helping neighbors, raising children, and sustaining family stability. As she described her current priorities: “Today what matters to me is helping people around me, taking care of my children, and living peacefully with my family.” (Siham). The moral lexicon remains familiar, but its horizon has shifted from transnational struggle to proximate responsibility.

Partial disengagement thus names a reorganization of affective investments rather than their disappearance. The militant framework no longer anchors moral life, yet fragments of meaning persist, folded into a reconfigured self that seeks continuity as much as distance. Jihane summarized this shift : “Before we thought we were helping a big cause. Now I think helping the people around you is already something important.” (Jihane)

2.4 Repositioning vis-à-vis state and community

Disengagement takes shape within social environments marked by the interplay of state authority and communal judgment. These are not neutral settings; they are arenas in which power is exercised, evaluated, and sometimes contested. Encounters with state officials are frequently ambivalent. Some women recount experiences of sharp humiliation that continue to structure how they interpret institutional authority. Ikram, for example, remembers a prison guard telling her to “leave [her] Allah outside.” (Ikram). She recalled the moment as deeply humiliating: “When he said that, I felt like they were insulting me, insulting my faith. It was not just about prison rules. It felt like they wanted to humiliate me.” (Ikram). She experienced the remark not only as degrading, but also as an act of symbolic violation. Such moments function as moral injuries: they do not merely wound personal dignity, but alter the frameworks through which legitimacy, justice, and state power are understood.

Other interactions unfold in a different register. Rather than overt hostility, some officials adopt a paternalistic tone, emphasizing maternal responsibility and presenting reintegration as a second chance grounded in care. Kelthoum described officials framing reintegration in explicitly maternal terms: “They told me: you are a mother now, you must think about your child now and start your life all over again.” (Kelthoum). Yet this language of care remains conditional. As Amira explained: “They told me that if I behaved well and stayed quiet, things would become easier.” (Amira). It situates return within expectations of reform and compliance, subtly reinforcing the asymmetry between those who judge and those who are judged.

Reactions within local communities are equally unstable. Women describe responses that shift between stigma, curiosity, pity, and suspicion. Amira described how this played out in everyday interactions: “People looked at me differently. Some were curious, some avoided me like we have never known each other, others just watched in weird ways.” (Amira). Public visibility becomes burdensome. Several recount the feeling of having been transformed into objects of gossip or spectacle, a condition that deepens their desire for privacy and the restoration of ordinary dignity. Ikram explained: “Everyone in the neighborhood knew my story. People talked about it all the time.” (Ikram). The sense of being constantly observed—by neighbors, family, employers, or municipal authorities—adds another layer of strain to post-militant life, extending surveillance beyond formal institutions into everyday social relations. As Jihane put it: “You always feel that people are watching you and judging what you do.” (Jihane).

Reintegration, therefore, exceeds mere behavioral conformity. It entails processes of moral repair that are relational and uneven. For some, repair takes an outward-facing form through public advocacy or participation in associations. Samira explains :

“We [my sister and I] are now more sufis, following the middle-ground Islam. We know violence has nothing to do with Islam and want this to be known for people so they don’t fall in the same trap as we did. We try to be outspoken about it and raise awareness.” (Samira)

For others, it proceeds quietly through caregiving and sustained efforts to rebuild trust within family networks. Kelthoum, for example, described rebuilding dignity through ordinary responsibility and work:

“Now I work for my children. I want them to see that their mother struggled and raised them with dignity. Being both mother and father and responding to duty—that is an honor. You just need patience and to be satisfied with what you have.” (Kelthoum)

Disengagement, in this sense, is not a solitary act but an ongoing negotiation within overlapping regimes of expectation, scrutiny, and conditional acceptance.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these findings suggest that disengagement, across six trajectories, is best understood not as rupture but as reconfiguration. It does not begin with ideological renunciation, nor does it culminate in moral emptiness. Rather, it unfolds as a protracted sociomoral process in which affective erosion and moral re-anchoring operate in tandem.

The first movement—affective erosion—reveals how militant commitment weakens from within. Early engagement is sustained by dense emotional investments: dignity restored through piety, belonging forged in shared devotion, and transcendence promised in the face of biographical injury. Yet the very intensity that once anchored commitment renders it vulnerable to contradiction. Everyday violence, hypocrisy, gendered subordination, displacement, hunger, media spectacle, and institutional humiliation accumulate as ethical frictions. These frictions do not immediately dissolve belief; they drain the affective energies that once animated it. Fear redirects attention from eternity to embodied fragility. Shame migrates across audiences. Guilt recenters moral concern on proximate relationships. Exhaustion signals the collapse of emotional labor required to sustain militant belonging. What erodes first is not doctrine, but the emotional infrastructure that made doctrine compelling.

The second movement—moral reweaving—demonstrates that disengagement is not simply subtraction. As militant attachment weakens, women re-anchor their moral worlds in care, relational obligation, and survival within gendered constraint. Pregnancy, motherhood, and responsibility toward family do not merely introduce competing priorities; they

reorganize the hierarchy of moral claims. Care becomes a rival normative authority, capable of displacing transnational struggle as the primary site of ethical investment. Yet this reorientation unfolds within systems of male guardianship, economic precarity, and social surveillance. Agency is neither absent nor absolute. It is negotiated, often performed through culturally legible roles—repentant daughter, responsible mother—in order to render exit actionable.

Crucially, disengagement remains partial. Women do not narrate clean ideological breaks; they differentiate between ideals and enactments, between moral aspiration and violent practice. Religious language persists, but its horizon shifts. Fragments of meaning are retained and reinterpreted within a reconfigured self. This continuity is not evidence of failed deradicalization; it reflects the human necessity of identity coherence. To disengage is not to erase the past, but to reposition it within a livable present.

Finally, these processes unfold within contested social fields shaped by state authority and communal judgment. Reintegration is experienced through ambivalent encounters—humiliation, paternalism, suspicion, occasional recognition. Surveillance extends from prison to neighborhood, from media representation to everyday gossip. Disengagement therefore exceeds behavioral compliance. It entails moral repair under conditions of conditional acceptance, where belonging is fragile and recognition remains partial.

Across these trajectories, disengagement emerges as a relational, gendered, and affectively mediated transformation. It is neither purely cognitive nor purely emotional, neither wholly voluntary nor wholly imposed. It is a gradual recalibration of attachment, responsibility, and possibility—an uneven process through which women move from fervor to fatigue, from mobilization to care, and from militant certainty to negotiated forms of moral life.

Discussion

This article set out to conceptualize affective disengagement not as a simple decline in enthusiasm or motivation, but as a gradual transformation in the structure of attachment through which militant worlds are experienced and sustained. More precisely, it refers to a shift in the affective orientations that bind individuals to a collective project: the attenuation

of trust, fervor, moral urgency, and perceived sacredness that once rendered participation meaningful. Across the six examined trajectories, disengagement unfolds as a slow recalibration of affective orientations, moral priorities, and gendered obligations within socially and materially constrained environments. In several cases, emotional and moral detachment emerged before any clear doctrinal reformulation, and in others, behavioral withdrawal was shaped as much by care obligations, surveillance, or exhaustion as by ideological reconsideration. Understood in this way, disengagement is not a discrete stage in a linear exit sequence, but a cumulative process through which militant attachment becomes progressively less livable. Understood in this way, disengagement is not a discrete stage in a linear exit sequence, but a cumulative process through which militant attachment becomes increasingly difficult to sustain and, ultimately, less livable.

Affective erosion as mechanism, not aftermath

Although a growing body of violent extremism (VE) research acknowledges the importance of emotions, dominant analytical and policy frameworks have often privileged ideological reorientation or behavioral cessation as primary indicators of change (Horgan, 2009; Barrelle, 2015). Within such models, emotions are frequently positioned either as catalysts of initial radicalization or as consequences of later disillusionment (Borum, 2011). The trajectories analyzed here suggest a more complex ordering. In these cases, fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion did not simply follow doctrinal doubt; they often preceded and shaped it. Before articulating disagreement with specific interpretations of jihad, the women described a subtle thinning of fervor: participation felt heavier, obligations more burdensome, the effort required to sustain conviction increasingly disproportionate. They continued to cite familiar religious references and to perform expected roles, yet the intensity that had once animated these practices began to dull. What eroded first was not belief as an abstract proposition, but the affective infrastructure—the trust, exhilaration, and moral urgency—that had rendered belief meaningful and redemptive. In this sense, affective erosion operates not as an aftereffect of cognitive change, but as a generative mechanism through which militant commitment gradually loses its emotional and moral force.

These insights also resonate with emerging practitioner-oriented approaches that emphasize relational and meaning-centered forms of intervention in deradicalization work.

Methods such as motivational interviewing (Clark, 2019), meaning-centered counseling (Koehler & Klosinski, 2025), and peer-support structures including self-help groups (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018) are grounded in the premise that disengagement cannot be achieved through doctrinal correction alone. Instead, these approaches seek to rebuild affective connections to alternative communities, values, and life trajectories. While the present study does not evaluate intervention programs directly, the trajectories examined here suggest that processes of affective erosion and moral reorientation may constitute key experiential entry points through which such interventions can become meaningful.

Drawing on affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2002), this study distinguishes between discrete emotions and broader affective orientations. The latter—trust, devotion, exhilaration, moral intensity—constituted the background attunement through which jihadist projects initially appeared meaningful. Over time, these orientations shifted. Devotion dulled into obligation; solidarity became surveillance; anticipation of reward gave way to dread. Such shifts were often subtle and uneven, and in several cases women continued to perform expected roles while privately experiencing detachment. Affective disengagement thus names a transformation in how the militant world is felt and inhabited, rather than a publicly declared break.

This reframing challenges sequential models inherited from cult-exit and Islamist defection literature (Wright, 1987; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009), in which emotional withdrawal precedes cognitive distancing in a relatively linear progression. The trajectories examined here reveal a more recursive dynamic: affective erosion unsettles moral certainties, yet residual beliefs may persist long after fervor collapses. Cognitive doubt is not the engine of disengagement but one possible articulation of a deeper affective reorientation. By conceptualizing affective disengagement as a mechanism of gradual depletion, the study integrates dispersed insights on burnout, strain, and disillusionment (Gielen, 2019) into a more coherent analytic lens.

Moral worlds and the uninhabitability of commitment

The findings further demonstrate that affective erosion cannot be understood apart from the moral worlds in which militant commitments are embedded. Jihadist engagement, for the women in this study, was not merely strategic or ideological. It was experienced as a

moral project organized around piety, sacrifice, dignity, and care for a broader community. Disengagement emerged when these moral worlds became increasingly difficult to inhabit.

Encounters with everyday violence, gendered subordination, hypocrisy, hunger, bombardment, and institutional humiliation accumulated as ethical contradictions. These were not abstract inconsistencies; they were embodied disruptions of moral coherence. The promise of justice coexisted with the sight of dismembered civilians. Ideals of sisterhood collided with practices of surveillance and remarriage pressure. Claims of divine order were experienced alongside arbitrary control and deprivation. Such contradictions generated what can be described as moral fatigue: a cumulative strain produced by the repeated misalignment between professed ideals and lived realities.

Here, adjacent literatures on moral injury (Litz et al., 2009) and the anthropology of ethics (Lambek, 2010; Mahmood, 2005) illuminate the process at stake. Distress did not arise solely from fear or pragmatic calculation, but from the perception that one's participation implicated one in harm or betrayed deeply held commitments. Guilt centered less on doctrinal error than on relational consequences—mothers subjected to police raids, children stigmatized, families burdened. Disengagement, in this light, reflects not a cooling of passion alone but a reweighing of what counts as just, bearable, and spiritually defensible. Affective disengagement is therefore inseparable from moral re-evaluation: attachment weakens as the militant moral order loses its capacity to sustain a livable ethical self.

This perspective deepens existing VE accounts of disillusionment by foregrounding moral experience rather than organizational failure alone (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014). Exit was not triggered simply by disappointment with leaders or unmet promises, but by the gradual realization that the militant world no longer aligned with participants' evolving understandings of care, responsibility, and dignity. Disengagement thus appears as an ethical transformation before it becomes an ideological one.

Gendered agency and the recalibration of obligation

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how affective disengagement is shaped by gendered forms of labor and obligation. Women's attachments to jihadist milieus were embedded in practices of care, marriage, reproduction, and emotional management. These were not peripheral roles but constitutive of how belonging was experienced and

enacted. Early engagement was often sustained through intense emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983): cultivating piety, supporting networks, caring for children under siege, embodying moral exemplarity.

Over time, however, the very structures that organized attachment became sites of strain. Pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare recalibrated risk in ways that reoriented moral priorities. Care emerged as a rival normative authority (Tronto, 1993), capable of displacing transnational struggle as the primary locus of ethical investment. Decisions to withdraw or return were frequently narrated not as ideological rejection but as maternal responsibility. This does not reduce disengagement to biological determinism; rather, it underscores how moral reasoning is situated within gendered expectations and relational dependencies.

The trajectories also illustrate that agency operates within systems of male guardianship, economic precarity, and surveillance. Women rarely experienced exit as an autonomous declaration. Instead, they negotiated with husbands, relatives, and authorities, often adopting culturally legible roles—repentant daughter, responsible mother—to render disengagement actionable. Agency here is neither absent nor sovereign; it is exercised through navigation under constraint (Mahmood, 2005; Butler, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988). Recognizing this challenges gender-neutral disengagement models that presume comparable autonomy across actors. It also complicates policy frameworks that assess risk without accounting for how women’s obligations to children, kin, and community reshape both attachment and withdrawal.

Partial disengagement and identity continuity

The data further complicate binary distinctions between commitment and renunciation. Several women rejected specific practices—indiscriminate violence, coercive control—while retaining elements of religious language or moral aspiration. Rather than interpreting such continuity as incomplete deradicalization, the concept of partial disengagement advanced here treats it as a feature of identity repair (Goffman, 1963; Riessman, 2008). Individuals rarely abandon entire moral vocabularies; instead, they differentiate between ideals and enactments, reinterpreting past commitments within a revised ethical horizon.

From this perspective, residual religious references do not necessarily signal ongoing operational risk. They reflect the human need for narrative coherence. To disengage is not to

erase one's past but to reposition it within a livable present. Policy frameworks that equate ideological residue with recidivism risk misrecognizing the complexity of moral reconstruction and, in doing so, may inadvertently undermine reintegration efforts.

Relational fields of reintegration

Finally, disengagement unfolds within contested relational fields shaped by state authority, media representation, and community judgment. Encounters marked by humiliation or instrumentalization can deepen moral injury, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and distrust. Conversely, experiences of procedural fairness and recognition can facilitate dignity restoration. Reintegration, therefore, cannot be reduced to behavioral compliance; it involves ongoing negotiation of belonging under conditions of conditional acceptance and persistent stigma.

These processes also occur in an environment characterized by economic precarity, with limited access to stable income, employment, and social support networks, potentially limiting the sustainability of disengagement. In such cases, the sustainability of post-militant paths is shaped not merely by moral and affective transformations but also by the existence of viable alternatives.

These findings also align with scholarship on relational dignity and desistance (Maruna, 2001), yet they extend it by foregrounding the affective and moral dimensions of post-militant life. Surveillance does not end with prison release; it persists in neighborhood gossip, employer suspicion, and institutional monitoring. Affective repair is thus embedded in everyday interactions. Sustainable disengagement depends not only on ideological reassessment but on the reconstruction of social environments in which revised moral identities can be acknowledged.

Toward a reconfigured model of disengagement

Taken together, the trajectories analyzed here invite a reconfiguration of disengagement. Affective disengagement should be conceptualized as a gradual mechanism of erosion operating at the intersection of affective orientations, moral worlds, and gendered agency. It is neither purely cognitive nor merely emotional, neither wholly voluntary nor wholly imposed. It is a process through which militant commitments become progressively

less affectively resonant and less morally habitable, prompting a re-anchoring of attachment in proximate forms of care and responsibility.

By integrating insights from cult-exit studies (Wright, 1987), political Islam scholarship (Wiktorowicz, 2005), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), moral injury research (Litz et al., 2009), and feminist analyses of agency (Mahmood, 2005; Butler, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988), this study offers a more textured account of women's trajectories out of jihadist networks. It suggests that durable exit cannot be fully understood through models centered on ideology or behavior alone. Instead, it requires attention to the slow transformations in how individuals feel with and for militant projects, how they evaluate their ethical commitments, and how they navigate gendered constraints in reshaping their lives.

Disengagement, in this sense, is not a moment of rupture but an uneven sociomoral transformation. It is the gradual movement from fervor to fatigue, from transcendent promise to proximate obligation, and from militant certainty to negotiated forms of moral life. Recognizing this complexity clarifies the conditions under which exit becomes possible—and the relational environments required to sustain it.

This article has argued that women's exits from jihadist involvement in Morocco are best understood not as dramatic ruptures, but as gradual moral and affective shifts. Disengagement did not occur through sudden ideological reversal. Instead, it unfolded as a slow weakening of the emotional energies—trust, conviction, dignity, and moral intensity—that once made militant participation feel urgent and meaningful. Across the six trajectories examined, change emerged as an uneven recalibration of attachment and responsibility rather than a simple cognitive or behavioral break.

Militant engagement was sustained by a dense moral world. Disengagement began when that world became increasingly difficult to inhabit. Everyday contradictions—between promised justice and experienced violence, between ideals of sisterhood and practices of control—generated not only doubt, but emotional strain. Fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion gradually eroded the sense of belonging that had anchored commitment. What diminished first was less belief itself than the capacity to feel morally at home within the militant order.

At the same time, disengagement was not merely subtractive. As attachment to jihadist projects weakened, women reoriented their moral lives around proximate obligations, particularly motherhood and family care. These responsibilities did more than compete with

militancy; they reorganized moral priorities. Yet such shifts occurred within enduring constraints—male guardianship, economic precarity, and social surveillance. Agency therefore appeared as negotiation rather than autonomy, often enacted through culturally recognizable roles that enabled withdrawal without public rupture.

These trajectories complicate linear models of deradicalization. Disengagement was frequently partial: religious language and certain ethical aspirations endured even as violence was rejected. Such continuity reflects not failure, but the need for moral coherence. Rather than abandoning entire moral vocabularies, individuals reinterpreted them within revised horizons.

Ultimately, disengagement emerges as a slow reorientation of attachment—from fervor to fatigue, from transcendent struggle to proximate responsibility. Attending to these incremental transformations allows for a more grounded understanding of how militant commitments lose their hold and how alternative, if constrained, forms of moral life gradually take shape.

Practice implications: limits and openings

Three structural arguments emerge from the analysis for practitioners working in P/CVE and reintegration contexts. They are presented as analytical repositioning rather than operational protocols, given the small-N basis of the study.

First, if affective erosion tends to precede doctrinal doubt, then interventions oriented toward ideological correction may arrive either too late or too early in relation to the key transformation. Assessing readiness for disengagement solely through belief change introduces the risk of both false positives (women who articulate ideological compliance while remaining affectively attached) and false negatives (women who have undergone substantial affective erosion but retain elements of religious vocabulary). Redirecting analytical attention toward affective and relational indicators — such as declining enthusiasm, increased orientation toward care, withdrawal from militant discourse, or expressions of fatigue and moral strain — may offer earlier and more reliable signs of an ongoing shift.

Second, for women in particular, relational reanchoring around care and family appears to function not merely as a consequence of disengagement, but as a central moral mechanism through which it unfolds. Interventions that position motherhood and kinship

obligations as secondary to ideological reassessment may therefore misinterpret the sequence of change. Approaches that engage directly with care responsibilities — including support for childcare, family reunification, and economic stability — may be more effective in consolidating emerging disengagement than additional doctrinal interventions. Frameworks that emphasize meaning-making and relational repair, rather than cognitive correction alone, appear more consistent with the dynamics identified here. Existing approaches such as motivational interviewing (Clark, 2019) and meaning-centered interventions (Koehler & Klosinski, 2025) are particularly relevant in this regard, as they target the affective and moral dimensions of disengagement rather than purely ideological ones, and may therefore align more readily with the relational reanchoring processes documented across these trajectories.

Third, partial disengagement should be understood as an indicator of programmatic success rather than failure. The women examined in this study did not exit through complete ideological rupture; instead, they developed reconfigured moral horizons that retained elements of religious language and ethical aspiration. Requiring full doctrinal renunciation as a condition for reintegration risks extending uncertainty for women who have already disengaged in affective and relational terms, while potentially signaling that their revised — yet still religious — identities are not acceptable. Recognizing the partial, ongoing, and inherently incomplete character of disengagement may itself be essential for enabling durable exit.

Conclusion

Across the six trajectories examined in this article, disengagement does not take the form of an abrupt ideological rupture but unfolds as a gradual reconfiguration of affective and moral attachment. The analysis suggests that women's pathways out of jihadist radicalization are less accurately described as conversions—from “extremism” to liberalism for example—or as decisive theological reversals, than as slow transformations in how militant commitment is inhabited and sustained. What emerges from their narratives is not an immediate repudiation of doctrine, but a progressive alteration in the texture of experience: fervor becomes attenuated, obligation grows heavy, and fear, shame, guilt, and exhaustion accumulate over time.

Belief, in these accounts, does not disappear in a moment of intellectual refutation. It loses intensity. The jihadist project does not collapse primarily under argumentative scrutiny; it gradually ceases to resonate affectively. In this respect, the findings call into question models of disengagement that privilege ideological correction as the primary engine of exit. The evidence points instead to a process of affective depletion, in which the emotional and moral energies that once animated participation are slowly worn down.

As attachment weakens, proximate concerns acquire greater normative weight. The protection of children, the preservation of dignity, and the management of everyday fatigue increasingly displace the appeal of a transcendent political-religious horizon. This reordering of priorities does not necessarily entail the adoption of secular or liberal worldviews. Several participants retain religious vocabularies and moral aspirations, and some continue to differentiate between ethical ideals and their violent enactment. What shifts is not faith as such, but the livability of militant attachment. The project that once appeared redemptive becomes burdensome; the moral world that once promised coherence becomes difficult to inhabit.

Disengagement, then, is best understood here not as a cognitive correction but as an affective and relational transformation. It is marked less by doctrinal renunciation than by fatigue—a thinning of emotional intensity that renders sustained mobilization untenable. In their own understated terms, the women describe becoming tired.

Recognizing disengagement as an affective and relational transformation rather than a purely ideological shift has important implications for both scholarship and practice. While affective disengagement does not present itself as a discrete or easily measurable state, the trajectories examined here point to a series of recurrent shifts through which it may be apprehended: a waning enthusiasm for militant discourse, a growing sense of emotional fatigue, the emergence of moral discomfort in relation to violence, and a reorientation toward proximate relational obligations, particularly family and care. These shifts are often gradual, uneven, and not always verbally articulated as doubt. Yet they signal a deeper transformation in how militant commitment is felt and inhabited. Attending to such patterns does not offer predictive tools, but it does provide a more grounded way of recognizing disengagement as it unfolds in lived experience.

This perspective also carries implications for how disengagement is approached in practice. Efforts to support disengagement may therefore benefit from engaging the moral and affective dimensions of experience—through the rebuilding of trust, the recognition of care responsibilities, and the creation of conditions in which new forms of belonging can be experienced as viable. In this respect, approaches that foreground meaning-making and relational repair appear particularly well aligned with the dynamics identified in this study.

What these trajectories ultimately demonstrate is the inadequacy of models that situates the driving force of disengagement in argument. These women did not reason their way out; they fatigued their way out, as accumulated contradictions gradually depleted the emotional foundation that had once made conviction feel urgent and redemptive. In many cases, belief endured well beyond the capacity to sustain it. This leads to a counterintuitive implication: if fatigue rather than persuasion is the primary driver, then the conditions for durable exit may depend less on what women are told and more on whether the social and material environments to which they return can support the reconstruction of a self not organized around militancy. The central question for deradicalization practice, then, is not “has she renounced the ideology,” but “does she have somewhere livable to go.”

AI statement

AI tools (ChatGPT) were used to assist with translation from Darija and French into English and for editorial refinement of the text. All substantive analytical work, intellectual contributions, and interpretations, as well as responsibility for the content herein, remain exclusively with the author.

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