2 Studying involvement in terrorism

Published by

Schuurman, Bart.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66586.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66586
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This chapter details the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the multicausal framework used to study involvement in the Hofstadggroup. This discussion is preceded by a look at the various issues affecting research on terrorism in order to underline the importance of using primary-sources-based data. What are their benefits compared to secondary sources and why have terrorism researchers found it so difficult to incorporate them into their work? The chapter closes by providing definitions for commonly used but highly-debated terms such as ‘terrorism’, ‘radicalism’, and ‘extremism’.

2.1 Issues in terrorism research

Research on terrorism has a strong multidisciplinary character. Academic perspectives used to study this form of political violence range from psychology, sociology, political science, history, economics, criminology, and anthropology to international relations, law, the military sciences, and critical theory. Given this diversity in terrorism researchers’ backgrounds, the associated differences in the methodologies used, and the thus far limited attempts at integrating these perspectives, it is not surprising to find scholarship on terrorism spread over several subfields. However, the absence of a single field of terrorism studies is not necessarily an impediment to academic progress. As Schmid concludes his 2011 review of the literature on terrorism; a ‘fairly solid body of consolidated knowledge has emerged’. More worrying are the various and longstanding concerns over the empirical quality of this research.

Contrary to the claims of the recently created discipline of Critical Terrorism Studies, there is a long history of critical reflection among established terrorism scholars. In the 1980s, authors like Crenshaw, Reich, and Schmid and Jongman critiqued existing research for being unsystematic, ahistorical

4 Jackson, ‘The Core Commitments’, 244-46.
or alarmist, prone to unwarranted overgeneralizations and attempts to explain complex behavior in monocausal terms, as well as impressionistic, superficial, and pretentious. More recently, critics have pointed to the discrepancy between the small number of dedicated terrorism scholars and the multitude of one-time contributors, many of whom are non-academics or lack terrorism-related expertise. This critical perspective on the field is perhaps best summarized by Sageman’s 2014 claim that research on terrorism had ‘stagnated’.

Fortunately, research on terrorism has also seen important signs of progress and maturation in recent years. Improvements include an increase in collaborative research, a broadening of scholars’ interest beyond topics related to Islamist terrorism or weapons of mass destruction, a greater number of dedicated researchers and more variety in methodological approaches. Scholars have also drawn attention to the valuable knowledge gained since 9/11, for instance on risk factors for the occurrence of terrorism or the finding that radical beliefs alone are insufficient to explain involvement in this form of violence. Given these encouraging signs, claims of a stagnant field seem overly pessimistic. Yet, a core issue among these various concerns, namely that terrorism research has been too heavily reliant on secondary sources of information for too long, cannot be overlooked.

2.1.1 An overreliance on secondary sources

In 1988, Schmid and Jongman remarked that ‘there are probably few areas in the social science literature in which so much is written on the basis of so little research’. They were referring to the fact that very few terrorism researchers actually collected new data on their subject. Instead, most of them used the existing secondary literature, consisting of other academic works on terrorism but also media reports, as the basis for their own conclusions.

9 Ibid., 14-15; Silke, ‘An Introduction’, 1-2; Stampnitzky, Disciplining Terror, 7, 12-13, 44, 46.
13 Stern, ‘Response to Marc Sageman’, 608; McCauley and Moskalenko, ‘Some Things We Think We’ve Learned’, 602; Schanzer, ‘No Easy Day’, 598.
15 Schmid and Jongman, Political Terrorism, 179.
More than a decade later, Silke found that little had changed; publications on terrorism were still characterized by an overreliance on secondary sources and the predominance of literature-review-based methods.\textsuperscript{16} There has been little improvement since; a 2006 study found that just 3\% of research on terrorism was based on empirical analysis.\textsuperscript{17} A 2008 publication reached the conclusion that only 20\% of articles provided previously unavailable data.\textsuperscript{18} More recently, Sageman’s 2014 piece lamented that terrorism researchers were still largely unable to access and utilize primary sources.\textsuperscript{19}

An almost exclusive reliance on secondary sources means that researchers run the risk of developing theories that are insufficiently rooted in empirical evidence or rehashing existing findings rather than adding new insights. A second potential problem is that there is often a marked qualitative difference between secondary and primary sources, especially when those secondary sources are newspaper articles rather than academic publications. Whereas primary sources typically provide information based on the direct observation of, or participation in, a certain subject, secondary sources relate information indirectly. The lack of a first-hand perspective may introduce inaccuracies and the subjectivity inherent in the act of relaying information may have diminished its reliability.\textsuperscript{20} The qualitative differences between primary and secondary sources become all the more pronounced when the complexity of the subject of study increases.

There is little room for a reporter to make factual errors or misinterpret what happened when reporting on something as straightforward as a car crash. But the chances of this occurring when covering terrorism are considerably greater. The illegal and secretive nature of terrorism means that even such an ostensibly straightforward task as establishing a chronology of events can be a difficult undertaking. Journalists are often among the first to tackle these questions, a fact well illustrated by the numerous books on al-Qaeda written by investigative journalists shortly after the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{21} When such accounts are well researched, they can form invaluable sources of information. The more problematic aspect of relying on the journalistic literature is terrorism scholars’ heavy use of much shorter and less extensively researched newspaper articles, which are frequently published mere hours after the events they relate transpired and thus raise

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{16} Silke, ‘The Devil You Know’, 4-9.
\bibitem{17} Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley, ‘The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies’, 8.
\bibitem{18} Silke, ‘Holy Warriors’, 101.
\bibitem{21} E.g. Bergen, \textit{Holy War}; Burke, \textit{Al-Qaeda}.
\end{thebibliography}
critical questions concerning their accuracy and the comprehensiveness of the account presented.

On the one hand, media sources are a necessary staple in terrorism research as they are often the only readily available type of information. Yet assessments of their usefulness should take into account several potential concerns. First of all, newspapers and their reporters are selective in the stories they pursue.\(^{22}\) For instance, they tend to under-report or simply ignore failed or foiled terrorist attacks.\(^{23}\) Secondly, newspapers and other media outlets may be of questionable objectivity, colored by political leanings, or a desire to attract readership through sensationalist reporting. Furthermore, the reliability and objectivity of reporters’ sources can be hard to ascertain.\(^{24}\) Perhaps most problematic of all, media sources too frequently contain factual errors.\(^{25}\) In sum, these problems make media sources ill-suited to functioning as the main, let alone the only source of data used in academic research on terrorism.

Recent years have seen signs of a broadening of methodological approaches and indications that the overreliance on secondary sources may not be as pronounced in every subfield of terrorism research.\(^{26}\) These are promising trends, yet the scarcity of primary-sources-based research remains a key concern in the academic study of terrorism.\(^{27}\) Given that most publications cite secondary literature that, in turn, refers to yet another set of academic works, and that at the end of this referral chain the empirical data often consists of media accounts, a worrisome situation has developed. Much research on terrorism resembles a ‘highly unreliable closed and circular research system, functioning in a constantly reinforcing feedback loop’;\(^{28}\) More empirical work that utilizes high-quality sources is needed to move the study of terrorism forward.\(^{29}\)

Why has this lack of primary-sources-based research persisted? Crucially, terrorism is a difficult subject to study empirically.\(^{30}\) One way to gather


\(^{23}\) Schmid, ‘The Literature on Terrorism’, 461.


\(^{28}\) Dolnik, ‘Conducting Field Research’, 5.


primary sources is through interviews with (former) terrorists. While these are more common than might be assumed, finding and gaining access to individuals that engage(d) in illegal and violent activities is time-consuming and by no means guaranteed to succeed. All the more so when interviews are undertaken during fieldwork abroad. Although the potential dangers of fieldwork are generally described as manageable, they cannot be overlooked. Fieldwork or interviews also require ethics approval, which may form a considerable obstacle in itself. Especially after the 2014 Boston College controversy, where researchers were forced to hand over interviews with members of the Irish Republican Army to the Northern Irish police, breaching the interviewees’ confidentiality and leading to the arrest of Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams.

Government organizations such as law enforcement and intelligence agencies are another potential source of primary data on terrorism. However, most researchers lack security clearances and organizations involved in counterterrorism are generally reluctant to share their information for security and privacy-related reasons. Databases with information on terrorists and terrorist events constitute a third source of empirical data. However, the media-based foundation of many databases raises important questions about their reliability. Gaining primary-sources-based data on terrorism is certainly not impossible, but these obstacles go some way towards explaining its scarcity.

2.2 Making sense of involvement in terrorism

No less important than high quality-data is making sense of it. The rationale behind the multicausal approach to understanding involvement in the Hofstadgroup stems from a review of the literature on involvement in

31 Horgan, ‘Interviewing the Terrorists’, 195-211.
34 Dolnik, ‘Conducting Field Research’, 7-14.
35 Marcus, ‘Oral History’.
39 Taylor, ‘If I Were You’, 583.
terrorism,40 which revealed four key insights. First of all, there is no single, generally applicable ‘theory of terrorism’.41 Instead, with regard to its causes alone the literature is able to identify almost fifty separate hypotheses.42 Secondly, most of these explanations lack robust empirical verification.43 Both issues make it difficult to choose one particular theoretical approach to study involvement in the Hofstad group. After all, how to justify choosing one out of dozens of possible approaches, particularly when the validity of many of them has not been adequately ascertained?

Thirdly, studies that emphasize one particular hypothesis, such as a presumed link between poverty or discrimination and involvement in terrorism, tend to be unable to explain why only a minority of the individuals exposed to such factors turn to terrorism.44 Vice versa, monocausal approaches find it difficult to account for why not all of the people who do become involved in terrorism were exposed to the factor in question. For example, the ubiquitous use of ‘radicalization’ as an explanation for terrorism obscures the fact that the majority of individuals with ‘radical’ ideas never act on them, and that not all terrorists are strongly ideologically motivated.45 Because no single factor has been found that is both necessary and sufficient to explain involvement in terrorism, the potential factors underlying involvement in this phenomenon should be assessed in conjunction with one another, rather than independently or as mutually exclusive competitors.46

A fourth reason for choosing a multicausal analytical framework is that it is well-established that involvement in terrorism is best understood as the result of a complex process in which multiple factors play a role.47 Not only that, but these causative factors can reside at different levels of analysis and their relative importance may change over time.48 In other words, although a particular factor may convincingly explain why someone became involved

40 As there presently does not exist a specific set of explanations for the homegrown jihadist typology of terrorism, a wide net was cast that focused on terrorism in general.
46 Borum, Psychology of Terrorism, 10; Dalggaard-Nielsen, ‘Violent Radicalization in Europe’, 810.
48 Bjørgo, ‘Conclusions’, 260; Della Porta, Social Movements, 9-10; Horgan, Walking Away from Terrorism, 7-10.
in a terrorist group in the first place, it may lose its explanatory potential when it comes to ascertaining how or why that person came to commit an actual act of violence. As Della Porta states, ‘different analytical levels may dominate different stages of the evolution of radical groups’. 49

For these reasons, it would be difficult to justify using a single theoretical perspective to study involvement in the Hofstad group. An alternative is to use a multicausal approach. Not only does this reflect the complexity of terrorism, it also utilizes the explanatory power of the body of literature on the various factors relevant to understanding involvement in this phenomenon to its fullest potential. Such an approach can count on considerable support from the literature. 50 In the words of Borum, ‘any useful framework [to understand radicalization] must be able to integrate mechanisms at micro (individual) and macro (societal/cultural) levels’. 51 Similarly, Stern argues that ‘[humans] catch the fire of terrorism in myriad ways – some environmental, some individual (or more likely, in most cases, a mix of the two)’. 52

Many authors referenced in the previous paragraphs (implicitly) utilize three ‘levels of analysis’. A concept borrowed from the field of international relations, which commonly distinguishes between individual, state, and international system perspectives. 53 The study of terrorism similarly utilizes a distinction between micro, meso, and macro perspectives, but generally translates these as the individual, the group, and structural, or environmental conditions in which they operate. 54 That is not to say that there are no other useful analytical divisions that could be made. 55 But it is this tripartite distinction that is most commonly used to capture the myriad potential factors that may lead to involvement in terrorism, making it most suited for the goals of this book. Its utility is also well demonstrated by Della Porta’s work on post-1945 left-wing terrorism in Italy and Germany, which shows that by studying these three levels in conjunction with each other,

49 Della Porta, Social Movements, 10.
53 Rouke, International Politics, 65.
54 See also: Lia and Skjølberg, ‘Causes of Terrorism’, 1-82; Sageman, Leaderless Jihad, 13-16.
55 Oleson and Khosrokhavar, Islamism as Social Movement, 10; McAllister and Schmid, ‘Theories of Terrorism’, 255-60.
a fuller understanding can be generated of how and why people become
and remain involved in such groups.\textsuperscript{56}

\subsection*{2.2.1 Structural-level explanations for involvement in terrorism}

Structural-level factors relate to specific characteristics of the social, cultural, economic, and (geo)political environment that are seen as potential enablers, motivations, or triggers for involvement in terrorism.\textsuperscript{57} Examples include widespread poverty, profound social inequality, war or regional instability, and lack of political freedoms.\textsuperscript{58} In addition to forming environmental characteristics that can exert their influence over a longer period of time, structural factors can also relate to specific events in which people become embroiled. A government’s violent crackdown on a protest can be considered an example of such an event as it leaves a significant number of people with little choice but to undergo the violence that has suddenly become a part of their surroundings. Such events, and the grievances they may feed or form, can potentially form decisive moments in people’s lives that may set them on a path towards militancy and terrorism.

The above discussion is inspired by Crenshaw’s influential 1981 article on the causes of terrorism, in which she distinguishes between structural factors that function as preconditions and those that act as precipitants.\textsuperscript{59} Preconditions can provide both opportunities and motives for involvement in terrorism.\textsuperscript{60} With access to the Internet, for instance, people can easily find information on how to construct explosives, facilitating the acquisition of violent means. Ability alone, however, is unlikely to lead to an act of terrorism unless it is matched by a willingness to do harm. Structural factors that can motivate involvement in terrorism include widespread grievances against the government and intergroup inequality.\textsuperscript{61} The onset of Northern Ireland’s violent ‘Troubles’ in 1968, for instance, was influenced by the Catholic population’s political underrepresentation and socioeconomic disadvantage vis-à-vis their Protestant neighbors.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{56} Della Porta, \textit{Social Movements}, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{57} Lia and Skjølberg, ‘Causes of Terrorism’, 17-63; Ross, ‘Structural Causes’, 317.
\textsuperscript{58} Newman, ‘Exploring the “Root Causes”’, 749-72.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 381.
\textsuperscript{61} Lia and Skjølberg, ‘Causes of Terrorism’, 17-63.
\textsuperscript{62} Kennedy-Pipe, \textit{The Origins}, 39-41.
Precipitants are what Crenshaw identifies as ‘specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism’.63 Excessive use of force by the authorities can instigate a violent response, but precipitants need not be violent in nature. As Chapter 5 discusses in more detail, the broadcast of a controversial short film criticizing Islam was a key structural-level event for the Hofstadgroup as it exposed its participants to criticism of very closely held beliefs, triggering a violent response from one participant that led to the murder of Van Gogh. In more recent publications, the basic distinction between preconditions and precipitants that Crenshaw suggested in 1981 has been maintained, making this a valuable way of structuring the various explanations found at the structural level of analysis.64 Table 1 provides an overview of the most commonly encountered structural-level explanations for terrorism found in the literature, divided over the three categories described here.

Table 1  Structural-level explanations for involvement in terrorism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preconditions: Opportunities</th>
<th>Preconditions: Motives</th>
<th>Precipitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Internet</td>
<td>(Relative) Deprivation</td>
<td>Government’s excessive use of force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular support for terrorism</td>
<td>Intergroup inequality</td>
<td>Government attempts reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External assistance</td>
<td>Political grievances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/ cultural facilitation of violence</td>
<td>Clash of value systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective counterterrorism</td>
<td>Economic globalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political opportunity structure</td>
<td>Cultural globalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernization</td>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population growth/ youth bulge</td>
<td>Modernization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifts ethnic/ religious balance society</td>
<td>Spillover from other conflicts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td>State sponsorship of terrorism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass media</td>
<td>Power structure international system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized crime – terrorism nexus</td>
<td>Failed/ failing states</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2.2 Group-level explanations for involvement in terrorism

As a form of ‘organized violence’, considerable attention has been paid to the role of group dynamics in initiating, sustaining, and precipitating involvement in terrorism.\(^{65}\) Indeed, some authors believe this level of analysis to be an especially salient lens through which to study the phenomenon.\(^{66}\) In this book, explanations are categorized as belonging to the group level of analysis when they have their basis in the interaction between individuals or in the tangible and intangible attractions that group participation offers. Peer pressure, which under specific circumstances can push individuals towards participation in a terrorist group, is an example of the former.\(^{67}\) The possibility to acquire status, increased self-esteem, and a sense of belonging are some examples of the latter.\(^{68}\) Most explanations at this level of analysis focus on person-to-person interactions within the terrorist group itself. However, group effects can also stem from virtual social connections enabled by the Internet.\(^{69}\)

A literature review of group-level factors relevant to involvement in terrorism identified a wide variety of possible explanations. Some of these account for the formation of terrorist groups; how and why do people become involved in these violent organizations? Research indicates that preexisting social ties are especially important in this regard.\(^{70}\) Other explanations focus on how an actual act of terrorism comes about. What rationales underlie the decision of terrorist groups to commit attacks? One thing that this level of analysis lacks, however, is a broadly accepted way of distinguishing between the various explanations. Unlike the structural level of analysis, which could build on Crenshaw’s distinction between preconditions and precipitants, there is no common way of categorizing the various hypotheses to make for a more structured overview.

Instead, the author relies on work by Taylor and Horgan because it convincingly argues that the factors influencing people’s involvement in terrorist groups are distinct from those that govern a group’s decision to

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65 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 69.
67 Della Porta, ‘Recruitment Processes’, 310.
70 Della Porta, ‘Recruitment Processes’, 309-10.
commit a terrorist attack.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, joining a terrorist group does not automatically lead to involvement in (preparations for) an act of terrorist violence. As a result, explanations for the former do not necessarily extend to cover the latter. The distinction between group-level factors that can account for the process of becoming and remaining involved in a terrorist group, and those that can contribute to the rationale for committing an act of terrorist violence, forms the overarching structure for the group level of analysis. Because both subjects cover a large number of relevant explanations, they have been turned into separate chapters (see Tables 2 and 3). The second of these has been subdivided further based on the themes to emerge from the review of the relevant literature.

### Table 2  Group dynamics I: Becoming and staying involved in terrorist groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrorist group formation</th>
<th>Social identity and the benefits of group membership</th>
<th>Socialization into a worldview conducive to terrorism</th>
<th>The underground life</th>
<th>Social learning theory</th>
<th>The influence of leaders</th>
<th>Peer pressures</th>
<th>Brainwashing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Table 3  Group dynamics II: Committing acts of terrorist violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational lethality</th>
<th>Overcoming barriers to violence</th>
<th>Rationales for terrorism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational lethality</td>
<td>Diffusion of responsibility</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deindividuation</td>
<td>Organizational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authorization of violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 2.2.3  Individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism

The individual level of analysis seeks explanations for terrorism in the distinct psychological characteristics and ways of thinking of the terrorists themselves.\textsuperscript{72} During the 1970s and 1980s, as research on terrorism was emerging as a distinct subject of academic study, there was a strong focus on explaining terrorism as stemming from some form of psychopathology


\textsuperscript{72} Della Porta, \textit{Social Movements}, 9, 12-13; Victoroff, ‘The Mind of the Terrorist’, 3-42.
or as a result of psychological trauma incurred during childhood and adolescence. More recently, individual-level explanations have been particularly strongly wedded to the concept of ‘radicalization’. This is the idea that involvement in terrorism stems from the adoption of increasingly extremist political or religious worldviews.

Of the three levels of analysis, the individual one has arguably been affected most by the difficulties of gaining reliable data on terrorism. For instance, sound empirical evidence for serious mental health issues among terrorists has generally been lacking. Nevertheless, the individual perspective is a crucial complement to the other analytical lenses. As Crenshaw remarks, ‘terrorism is not the direct result of social conditions but of individual perceptions of those conditions’. Although a host of factors may exert an influence, involvement in terrorist groups and terrorist violence is still predicated on the deliberations and decisions of individuals.

The literature on individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism is extensive. In keeping with this study’s goals, only those hypotheses that focus directly on involvement in terrorism have been included for analysis. Publications on, for instance, the psychological impact of terrorism, biological explanations for violent behavior, or evolutionary psychological accounts for why certain behaviors exist in the first place, are not taken into consideration. In the end, two main areas of inquiry were identified that, because of their size, formed the basis for two separate chapters. The first of these deals with cognitive explanations for involvement in terrorism (Table 4). It essentially looks at how particular ways of thinking about and perceiving the world can make it more likely that someone becomes involved in extremism and terrorism. The second chapter discusses explanations for involvement that center on terrorists’ presumed distinctiveness in terms of psychology, character, or emotional state (Table 5).

**Table 4  Individual-level analysis I: Cognitive explanations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radicalization</th>
<th>Fanaticism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive openings and ‘unfreezing’</td>
<td>Cognitive dissonance and moral disengagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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76 Crenshaw, ‘Questions to Be Answered’, 250.
2.2.4 Interrelated perspectives

Each level of analysis offers unique explanations for involvement in terrorism. Although they are each treated in separate chapters, the distinctions between these various perspectives is in reality quite artificial. Structural, group, and individual-level factors do not exert their influence independent of one another, but frequently operate in an interdependent and interrelated fashion. To gain a comprehensive understanding of involvement in the Hofstadgroup, these various perspectives separately must also be discussed in relation to each other. Although each chapter refers to other levels of analysis where relevant, drawing together the various explanatory strands is the primary purpose of the concluding chapter.

2.3 Limitations

By studying the available empirical data on the Hofstadgroup through the various lenses provided by these three levels of analysis, a comprehensive understanding of how and why involvement in this group came about can be realized. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. A general first point is that, while the author has tried to be comprehensive in his approach, he does not claim to have found and utilized all possible explanations for terrorism. Undoubtedly, readers will remark upon omissions. Partly this may be because in the absence of clear naming conventions, the author has used unfamiliar designations, or because similar explanations have been grouped together under a single heading. Given the large amount of literature on, or relevant to understanding involvement in terrorism, a truly exhaustive overview is practically unfeasible.

A more specific limitation is the omission of social movement theory as a potential explanation for involvement in terrorism. According to Tarrow, social movements are ‘collective challenges, based on common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5 Individual-level analysis II: Terrorists as psychologically distinctive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychopathology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychoanalysis, significance loss and identity-related alienation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist personality or profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger and frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortality salience</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.77 While the Hofstadgroup’s adoption of a militant interpretation of Islam could be seen as a collectively mounted form of contention targeted at both the Dutch authorities, non-militant Muslims, and unbelievers, a clearly defined common purpose was strikingly absent. This finding, which is discussed in considerable detail in later chapters, forms an impediment to viewing the Hofstadgroup from a social movement perspective.

In addition to lacking collective goals, the Hofstadgroup also failed to engage in collective action. According to Beck, terrorism can be seen as a form of collective action focused on making political claims and seeking political influence, which in turn allows terrorist groups to be studied as movements with political goals.78 The very absence of such claims and the associated instrumental use of violence problematizes seeing the Hofstadgroup’s activities in this light. The only terrorist attack to actually materialize was the murder of Van Gogh, which was not the result of a collective effort but the work of one man. Furthermore, there are no indications that the killer was pursuing political goals. While there were some signs that the Hofstadgroup was beginning to undertake collective efforts towards the end of its existence in 2005, later chapters will demonstrate that collective action, like a common purpose, was for all intents and purposes not part of the group’s repertoire.

A final reason why social movement theory is not used to study involvement in the Hofstadgroup is its emphasis on contention and social interactions, which leaves only a secondary role for the explanatory potential of ideas, beliefs, and the biographies or characteristics of individuals.79 This comes back to the assumption that involvement in terrorism is a multicausal process with explanations at the structural, group, and individual levels of analysis. Focusing on one of these at the expense of another would go against the central aim of constructing a multifaceted understanding of involvement in the Hofstadgroup. None of this means, however, that social movement theory is abandoned altogether. Various elements, such as political-opportunity structure and the importance of looking at how terrorist groups frame their causes and their justifications for violence are discussed in the relevant chapters.

77 Tarrow, Power in Movement, 4, italics removed from original.
2.4 A definitional debate

The terms ‘terrorism’, ‘radical’, ‘extremist’, and ‘jihad’ are used throughout these pages. Virtually all of them can be interpreted in multiple ways and constitute subjects of an ongoing and sometimes controversial definitional debate. To avoid confusion, it is therefore important to make clear at the outset how these terms are understood here. On account of its especially divisive nature, ‘terrorism’ is discussed at some length whereas the other terms are introduced more succinctly.

2.4.1 Terrorism

The debate on what constitutes ‘terrorism’ and when individuals or groups become ‘terrorists’, is a contentious one. After decades of discussion, a broadly accepted definition is still not at hand. Some authors believe that such efforts are futile because terrorism ‘is a term like war or sovereignty that will never be defined in words that achieve full international consensus’. This quote suggests that the study of terrorism is not the only discipline to be affected by definitional quandaries. But that does little to diminish the adverse effects produced by the absence of a clear understanding of what ‘terrorism’ is. This issue has stood in the way of the development of a general theory of terrorism, ‘scattered and fragmented’ the focus of research efforts and complicated the comparison of research results. Some scholars have even argued that ‘it is time to stop using the “t word”’ altogether. Why has achieving consensus on the meaning of terrorism proven so difficult?

An immediate problem with the word ‘terrorism’ is that it has strong negative connotations, conjuring an image of ‘cowardly violence, fear, and intimidation’. A closely related second issue is the politicized nature of the term. The ‘terrorism’ descriptor is frequently used to delegitimize an oppositional regime, movement, or organization while simultaneously legitimizing violence against that opponent. Used in this fashion, the term terrorism becomes part of a ‘war of words’, aimed at condemning rather
than understanding a certain form of violent behavior.\textsuperscript{86} Such definitions
are essentially political tools that serve the defining party’s interests, for
instance by limiting the scope of ‘terrorism’ to an activity only non-state
actors can engage in, even though states can and have used terror on a
much larger scale than most non-state groups are capable of.\textsuperscript{87} The biases
inherent in such definitions make them unsuitable for research purposes.

A third obstacle is that the interpretation of what constitutes terror-
ism is highly subjective. This is best represented by the classic dichotomy
between freedom fighters and terrorists, with the choice for one or the
other depending on the observer’s perspective and his or her stake in the
conflict.\textsuperscript{88} Tellingly, few violent oppositional groups call themselves terror-
ists and most prefer to describe their activities in much more neutral terms
such as ‘liberation’ or ‘resistance’.\textsuperscript{89} Delineating where terrorism begins and
ends constitute a fourth stumbling block. How to disentangle terrorism
from insurgency, two forms of political violence that are often used in
conjunction with one another?\textsuperscript{90} Similarly, how is terrorism different from
organized crime? Criminals and terrorists both place a premium on secrecy,
they both use force and intimidation against civilians to achieve their aims,
and both exert strong control over group members.\textsuperscript{91}

These obstacles have not prevented the creation of many different legal,
government, and academic definitions of terrorism.\textsuperscript{92} Of these three types
of definitions, only academic ones are expressly intended to guide non-
partisan analysis, making them most suited to the task at hand.\textsuperscript{93} Within
the subset of academic definitions of terrorism, it is hard to overlook the
pioneering work of Alex Schmid, who has been working on the definitional
question for decades.\textsuperscript{94} This book utilizes Schmid’s 2011 ‘revised academic
consensus definition’ because it convincingly addresses the issues raised
above.\textsuperscript{95} Its neutral wording avoids issuing a value judgment on terrorism.
By being applicable to state as well as non-state actors, Schmid’s defini-
tion offers some protection against an overly politicized view of terrorism.

\textsuperscript{86} Turk, ‘Sociology of Terrorism’, 271-73.
\textsuperscript{87} Schmid, ‘The Definition of Terrorism’, 40.
\textsuperscript{88} Martin, \textit{Understanding Terrorism}, 34-36.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 35-36.
\textsuperscript{90} Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, ‘Insurgency and Terrorism’, 27-41.
\textsuperscript{91} Schmid, ‘The Definition of Terrorism’, 64-67.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 44-66; Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefer, ‘Challenges of Conceptualizing
Terrorism’, 780.
\textsuperscript{93} Hoffman, \textit{Inside Terrorism}, 31-33.
\textsuperscript{94} See, for instance: Schmid and Jongman, \textit{Political Terrorism}, 1-38.
\textsuperscript{95} Schmid, ‘The Definition of Terrorism’, 39-98.
Furthermore, its detailed nature allows it to differentiate terrorism from other forms of organized violence.

In these pages, therefore,

[t]errorism refers on the one hand to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.96

2.4.2 Radicalism and extremism

The terms ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ are repeatedly used to describe the convictions of Hofstadgroup participants. Because both are inherently subjective and frequently used interchangeably, clear definitions are in order.97 Schmid once again provides a thoroughly researched and well-reasoned definition of both terms. Radicalism comprises

- two main elements reflecting thought/attitude and action/behaviour respectively: 1. Advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical;
- 2. The means advocated to bring about the system-transforming radical solution for government and society can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution).98

Radicals may hold views that are deemed inappropriate, offensive, or disagreeable for other reasons, but they do not necessarily justify or support the use of violence. This marks an important difference with extremists.99

96 Ibid., 86-87, emphases in original.
While radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. Their state of mind tolerates no diversity. They are also positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power [...]. Extremists generally tend to have inflexible ‘closed minds’, adhering to a simplified mono-causal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them, part of the problem or part of the solution.100

For extremists, violence constitutes the preferred means to an end. This distinction is important, as it allows for a nuanced discussion of the beliefs held by Hofstadgroupparticipants and their views on the use of violence. It should be noted that some scholars refer to these dispositions using the terms ‘non-violent extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’.101 The author finds that ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ better convey the different mindsets associated with these positions which, as Schmid’s definitions make clear, encompass more than differing views on the use of violence alone.

2.4.3 Jihad and homegrown jihadism

Islam, which translates as ‘submission to the will of God’, constitutes one of the world’s three great monotheistic religions.102 There is, however, no singular way in which Islam is interpreted or practiced. This is reflected, for instance, in the division of the global community of believers, known as the ‘ummah’, between Sunnis and Shiites, a rift with its origins in a centuries-old debate over the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis, who constitute the largest denomination within Islam, believe that essentially anyone can be proclaimed heir to the prophet. Shiites, on the other hand, accept only Muhammad’s descendants, specifically the progeny of the prophet’s son-in-law Ali and his wife Fatima, who was Muhammad’s daughter. The Sunni-Shia divide is Islam’s most well-known internal division. But there are a multitude of other, smaller, denominations such as the Druze and the Alawis, as well as the more mystical approach to Islam known as Sufism, that further undermine the idea of Islam as a homogeneous religion.103

102 Esposito, Islam, 85.
Just as there is no one Islam, there is no one view on the conditions under which Muslims are allowed or required to use violence, who and what can justifiably be targeted, and which means and methods of war are permitted.\textsuperscript{104} The use of violence by Muslims has been closely linked to the concept of ‘jihad’, the Arabic word for struggle or effort.\textsuperscript{105} As a contested concept that has been the subject of centuries of debate and varying interpretations, there is not one clear way to define jihad.\textsuperscript{106} Moghadam notes that the Quran’s coverage of jihad allows a broad distinction to be made between a peaceful and an aggressive interpretation.\textsuperscript{107} The first form, which has also been called the ‘greater’ jihad, refers to an individual believer’s personal struggle against temptation and sin, his or her quest to live in accordance with god’s will, or a community’s efforts to better themselves.\textsuperscript{108} The aggressive or ‘lesser’ interpretation of jihad sees it as religiously sanctioned or mandated warfare.\textsuperscript{109}

Jihad is therefore not necessarily a violent undertaking. Unless specified otherwise, however, the use of the term jihad in this book refers to the ‘lesser’ or militant variety. Jihadist groups or individuals are thus those that believe their religious beliefs necessitate or sanction the use of violence against perceived enemies. Following Crone and Harrow’s definition, jihadists can be labeled ‘homegrown’ when they display a high degree of autonomy from internationally operating terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda, and a strong sense of belonging, e.g. through citizenship, to the countries they target.\textsuperscript{110}

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter began by highlighting several issues that have affected research on terrorism. In particular, the qualitative difference between primary and secondary sources and the longstanding scarcity of the former in existing research on terrorism. Given that terrorism is in many ways a difficult subject to study empirically, this situation is perhaps not that


\textsuperscript{105} Knapp, ‘Concept and Practice of Jihad’, 82.

\textsuperscript{106} Turner, ‘From Cottage Industry to International Organisation’, 544.

\textsuperscript{107} Moghadam, ‘Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom’, 126.


\textsuperscript{109} Turner, ‘From Cottage Industry to International Organisation’, 544; Moghadam, ‘Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom’, 126.

\textsuperscript{110} Crone and Harrow, ‘Homegrown Terrorism in the West’, 521-36.
surprising. Nevertheless, it has had serious consequences. There exist many explanations for involvement in terrorism whose accuracy and reliability have been insufficiently ascertained due to the difficulties of gathering the high-quality data required to do so. Consequently, this book sees the use of primary sources as a prerequisite for making a contribution to existing knowledge on the Hofstadgroup and understanding involvement in homegrown jihadism more broadly.

The bulk of this chapter was dedicated to explaining the decision to use a multicausal analytical framework for studying involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Using literature reviews, a comprehensive inventory was made of the various explanations for involvement in terrorism at the structural, group, and individual levels of analysis. Applying these to the available data on the Hofstadgroup will enable a multifaceted and detailed understanding of the factors that shaped participants’ involvement in this group to emerge. Following this discussion, the chapter concluded with an overview of several key terms that are used throughout the text.

One task remains before it is possible to move on to the analysis of the factors that influenced involvement in the Hofstadgroup proper. That is to familiarize readers with the Hofstadgroup and its activities. The next chapter provides a detailed chronology of the most important events in the group’s 2002-2005 existence in order to create the necessary factual background for the analysis that is to follow. Chapter 4 then rounds off the introductory section of this book by discussing the Hofstadgroup’s organizational and ideological characteristics, and assessing to what extent it can be considered a group that engaged in (preparations for) acts of terrorist violence.