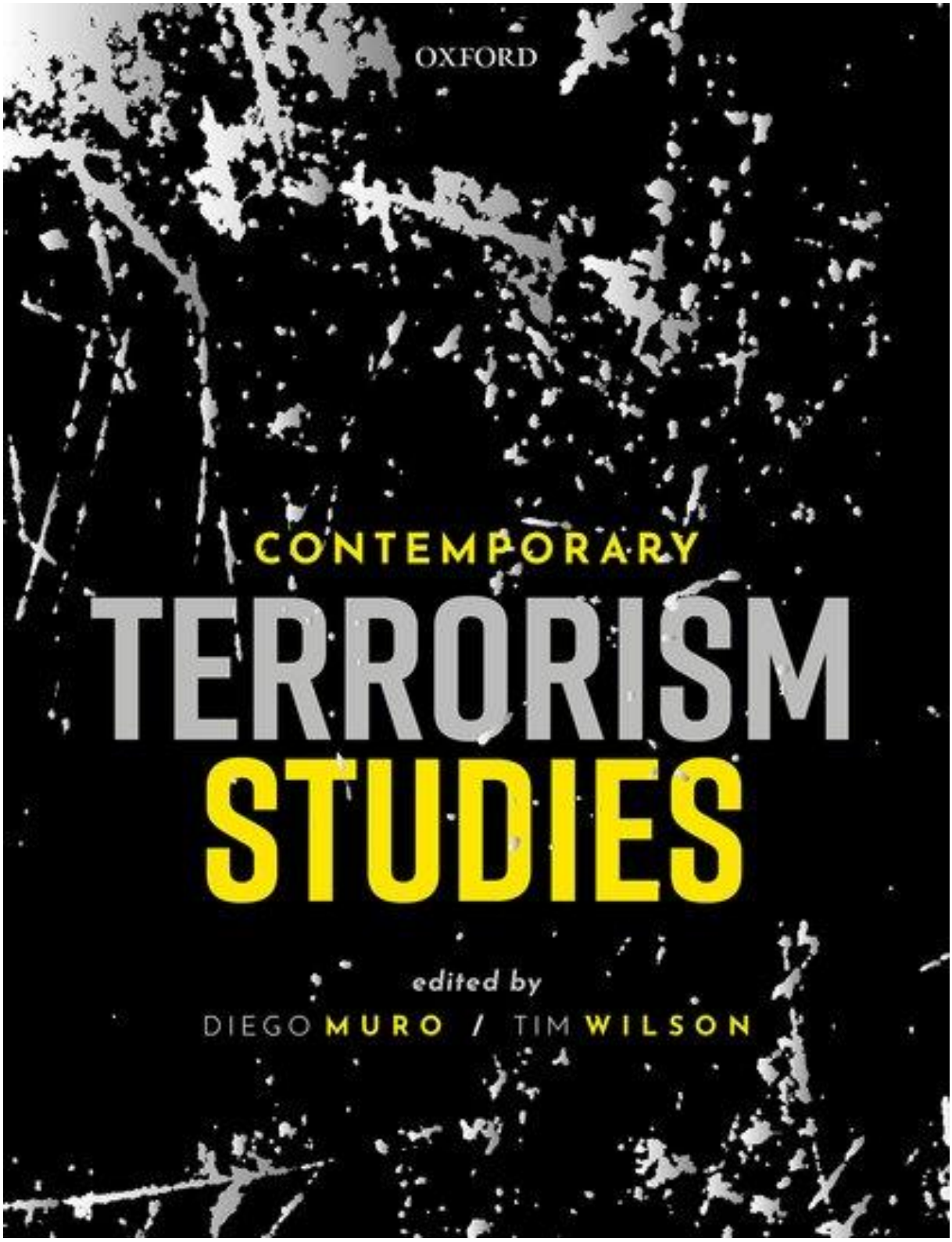

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CHAPTER 10

When Do Individuals Radicalize?

RIK COOLSAET

CHAPTER SUMMARY

For more than a century now, observers have been trying to understand why and how individuals become terrorists. Every time the international community was confronted with a significant wave of terrorist attacks, a sense of urgency boosted this quest for answers. Each time, fierce academic and public debates on the causes of terrorism ensued and answers varied widely, ranging from mental health problems to social injustice. Beyond scholarly differences and competing paradigms, however, broad areas of consensus have over time matured into solid research-based findings on some of the key variables that play a crucial role in the making of a terrorist. There is now a broad academic consensus that involvement in terrorism results from an interaction of personal trajectories with group dynamics and contextual factors. Acknowledging the progress made in the field of terrorism studies over the past hundred years and establishing its current state of play is useful for putting the ongoing scholarly and public debates into perspective.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Writing to President Nixon in March 1969, US National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger summarized the main findings of a secret CIA survey of the global student unrest of the late 1960s. With its 'behavioural, social-psychological emphasis', it represented an attempt to understand 'what makes Johnny riot'. Radicalization, Kissinger pointed out, is the process 'whereby more and more participants are drawn into protest (not unlike a lynch mob)'. However, there is 'no agreement as to the dynamics involved', but 'adolescent rebellion, existential "Angst", systemic alienation' may be purged through participating in the protest movement. 'Nihilism' was the actual programme of this 'New' Left: 'There is very little prescription and no discussion of the apocalyptic future. The system must be destroyed; then the future will be dealt with.' As to the future of the protest movement, he was less certain: 'It is not possible to assess whether the crest has been reached' (Kissinger 1969).

Kissinger referred to the work of sociologists who had been studying how individuals joined mass protest movements. Nowadays, 'radicalization' is commonly understood as the process through which an individual gets involved in terrorism. Ideally, the concept of radicalization should provide answers to questions such as: why do individuals join terrorist groups or commit terrorist acts? What goes on in their mind? What is the trigger that makes an individual cross the threshold to actually using violence? In short: What makes a terrorist?

While the concept of radicalization is recent, such questions are not. Walter Laqueur (1977a), one of the pioneers of modern terrorism studies, opined in the 1970s: 'Questions about what motivates the terrorist have been asked for a long time and the answers have varied enormously.' Over time, however, our knowledge about the dynamics that lead individuals towards violence has advanced significantly.

This chapter will first identify how scholars and observers reacted to the first truly global wave of terrorism at the end of the 19th century. The worldwide wave of political violence of the 1960s then allowed for the early sporadic observations on political violence to develop into a thriving research field that offered more insightful answers to the old questions. The post 9/11 environment saw the emergence of new models, concepts and mechanisms, that tried to systematize the knowledge on political violence. The chapter will conclude with a state of play concerning the 'making of a terrorist', that identifies the degree of broad consensus on the old question of what makes a terrorist.

10.2 THE EARLY ANSWERS

When the world faced the first truly global terrorist campaign in the 1880s, the most common view of the perpetrators was that they had to be senseless. The culprits were anarchists. Most anarchists were not terrorists. But a minority strongly believed that violence was the only way to achieve the anarchists' goal of upending bourgeois society. To the

well-off public, violent anarchism was an enigma at odds with the unparallelled material wealth, the scientific progress, and the ensuing optimism that marked the epoch of the late 1800s. Physicians considered them 'insane' 'irresponsible persons affected by a desire for martyr glory and irresistibly drawn towards the scaffold' (New York Times 1909). Some viewed anarchists as vulnerable youngsters, 'weak minds without education and without defence against the harmful ideas of agitators', as an observer noted in 1882, during the trial of a 19-year-old weaver who had attempted to kill a French industrialist (Bataille 1882).

Not everybody subscribed to the weak-minded or vulnerable youth theses, however. The late 19th-century psychiatrist Edward C. Spitzka was persuaded that violent anarchism represented a 'conspiracy among sane men'. While not excluding that some of them were 'unquestionably insane', they were nevertheless part of 'an international army organized to war upon society, directed by skilful generals (. . .)' (New York Times 1909).

Ernst Viktor Zenker, an Austrian journalist and MP, was more nuanced as to motivations. He strongly emphasized that context had to be taken into account (Zenker 1897). Anarchism could not be explained sufficiently—perhaps not at all—by mere poverty, he pointed out. It is not an economic but a political question. It results from 'a confused mass of injustice and wrongdoing, of which the bourgeois State is daily and hourly guilty towards the weak':

> The average man does not much mind his rich fellow-man riding in his carriage while he himself cannot even pay his tram fare; but that he should be abandoned by society to every chance official of justice, as a prey that has no rights (. . .) that makes his blood boil, and causes him to seek the origin of this injustice in the institution itself instead of in the way it works. How many Anarchists have become so merely because they were treated as common criminals when they happened to have the misfortune to be suspected of Anarchism? How many became Anarchists because they were outlawed by society on account of free and liberal views? (Zenker 1897: 322).

Zenker thus concluded with an outline of a whole-of-government disengagement strategy before the term was invented:

> A movement like Anarchism cannot be conquered by force and injustice, but only by justice and freedom (Zenker 1897: 323).

Notwithstanding all the efforts at identifying the terrorist mindset, no single profile of the anarchist terrorist existed. Some were *solitaires* (as lone wolves were then called by the French police), others were part of small cells, where it was 'often hard to distinguish the devoted anarchist militant, moved by a deep passion for justice, from the psychopath whose shadowy voices prompt him to take his private revenge on society by means of actions of which the anarchists had given him the example' (Joll 1964: 128). Anarchist violence was not necessarily the work of the destitute and the desperate. Depending on national contexts, violent anarchism could attract artisans threatened by rising industrialization, landless peasants or industry workers and miners, convinced the 'Social Revolution' was near. Some were middle class. 'Long live the Social Revolution' was often their battle cry when they went into action—or their last words before the blade

of the guillotine fell. They believed that their act—or their death—would set an example and inflame the masses. The masses were not particularly moved, but revenge for their death became a powerful motive for fellow anarchists to act in turn.

When put on trial, terrorists always blamed their violence on society, which left them no choice but violence. At his trial in 1892, a notorious French terrorist who went by the name of Ravachol, half anarchist, half criminal, explained his motivations as follows: 'I was forced to do so by necessity. [. . .] I was the one who had the right to expect everything from society. But society didn't give me anything' (Bataille 1892).

The early attempts to understand why individuals chose to perpetrate acts of political violence resulted in widely diverging diagnoses. But interest in the topic was largely sporadic. It took a new wave of terrorism, half a century later, to transform these observations into more systematic insights.

10.3 THE ADVENT OF TERRORISM STUDIES

By the 1960s, the interest in the old questions received a significant boost by the simultaneous advent of national liberation movements in the 'Third World' (as it was then called, generally considered paternalistic and derogatory terminology today), urban guerrilla movements in Latin America, the Basque and Irish republican turns to violence, student protests, and violent left-wing groups.

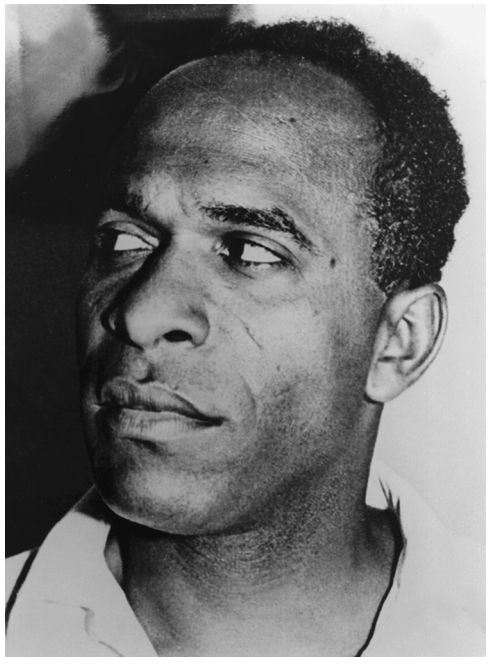

PHOTO 10.1 Frantz Fanon (1025-196) psychoanalysist and social philosopher.

Outside the West, the focus was mostly on the structural drivers of political violence. This was typically justified as a response to the intrinsic injustice and violence of colonialism. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was among the most influential voices claiming the need and the right for colonized people to resort to political violence in order to shed the burden of colonialism, both politically and culturally. Born in 1925 in Martinique, he left for Algeria in 1953, where he started to work as a psychiatrist and soon joined the National Liberation Front. Speaking on behalf of the have-nots of the world, Fanon considered violence not so much as the only means left, but as the only way for the colonized to reclaim both their own identity and a sense of national identity. Introducing Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre explicitly rejects psychological considerations to explain Fanon's call to arms: '. . . you need not think that hot-headedness or an unhappy childhood have given him [Fanon] some uncommon taste for violence'. Violence, according to Sartre, is a necessary evil to combat entrenched violence, when nonviolence 'serves only to position you in the ranks of the oppressors' (Sartre 1961).

CASE STUDY 10.1

'I am prepared to die'—Nelson Mandela on Terrorism

At the time apartheid ruled in South Africa, Nelson Mandela (1918–2013, see Photo 10.2) was its most prominent opponent. He was labelled a 'terrorist' by the authorities, as well as by many Western states. On 20 April 1964, he was brought to justice for acts of violence in a court trial. He used this opportunity to explain his point of view on the use of violence. In 1993, he received the Nobel Peace Prize. A year later, he became president of South Africa. As late as 2008, he was still on the US terrorism watch list. The extracts from his speech below were given at the Rivonia Trial, and are considered one of the great speeches of the 20th century:

'Some of the things so far told to the Court are true and some are untrue. I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the whites.

[. . .]

I have already mentioned that I was one of the persons who helped to form Umkhonto [armed wing of the African National Congress, the main resistance movement to apartheid]. I, and the others who started the organization, did so for two reasons. Firstly, we believed that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and that unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism which would produce an intensity of bitterness and hostility between the various races of this country which is not produced even by war. Secondly, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the

PHOTO 10.2 Nelson Mandela in 1993. Mandela was labelled a terrorist, and was on terrorist watch lists until 2008.

African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy. All lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed by legislation, and we were placed in a position in which we had either to accept a permanent state of inferiority, or to defy the Government. We chose to defy the law. We first broke the law in a way which avoided any recourse to violence; when this form was legislated against, and then the Government resorted to a show of force to crush opposition to its policies, only then did we decide to answer violence with violence.

[. . .]

Four forms of violence were possible. There is sabotage, there is guerrilla warfare, there is terrorism, and there is open revolution. We chose to adopt the first method and to exhaust it before taking any other decision.

[. . .]

But we in Umkhonto weighed up the whites' response with anxiety. The lines were being drawn. The whites and blacks were moving into separate camps, and the prospects of avoiding a civil war were diminishing. The white newspapers carried reports that sabotage would be punished by death. If this was so, how could we continue to keep Africans away from terrorism?'

Mandela's stance on terrorism illustrates Franz Fanon's argument that a highly oppressive state ('a land ruled by the gun' as Mandela described South Africa under the apartheid regime), renders the use of armed struggle inevitable, since all peaceful means to eradicate

the entrenched oppression have proven futile. Through this armed struggle a nation acquires its self-determination and identity. Since 1960, United Nations resolutions have legitimized this specific use of violence by recognized liberation movements.

QUESTIONS

1. How do Mandela's words relate to the 1960s maxim that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'?
2. Is this description of the different forms of political violence still valid in today's world?

In Europe and the United States, too, the worldwide wave of political violence enhanced the relevance of the study of political violence. Combining two existing notions—the relationship between frustration and aggression and relative deprivation—the American political scientist Ted Gurr argued that men become discontented when they do not get that to which they think they are entitled. Actual material deprivation is thus not the cause of their discontent (Zenker suggested the same in 1897), but rather it is the gap between what they expected and what they actually get: 'Men who are frustrated have an innate disposition to do violence to its source in proportion to the intensity of their frustration' (Gurr 1970: 37).

Gurr offered a powerful argument, but not everyone was convinced about its utility in explaining terrorism or, in particular, individual motivations. While sharing Gurr's observation that 'it is ultimately the perception of grievance that matters, not the grievance itself', Walter Laqueur (1976: 103, 1977b) warned against grand schemes to explain such a complex phenomenon as terrorism.

The British scholar of terrorism Paul Wilkinson was also of the opinion that Gurr's relative deprivation propositions were 'pitched at such a high level of generality that it is hard to see how they could be invalidated' (Wilkinson 1974: 126). Nevertheless, he was adamant that 'context was all in the study of political violence' (Wilkinson 1986). But he insisted that the study of terrorism should also take into account the ideologies, beliefs and lifestyles of the terrorists: '. . . every international terrorist movement or group requires an extremist ideology or belief-system of some kind to nourish, motivate, justify and mobilize the use of terror violence' (Wilkinson 1988: 95). Personal characteristics such as 'passionate idealism and conviction' should not be discarded. He warned, however, against the tendency to stereotype terrorists as 'psychopaths' based on intelligence measurement scales (Wilkinson 1974: 132–133).

The American scholar Martha Crenshaw offered the most elaborate model put forward by the pioneers of terrorism studies. In her landmark 1981 contribution on the causes of terrorism (Crenshaw 1981), she too insisted that context was of the essence in understanding terrorism. Its causes lie in a conducive environment that permits its emergence *and* in direct motivating factors that propel people to violence. Crenshaw was the first scholar to propose an integrated approach to the study of terrorism by looking into the interplay between the societal context, psychological considerations and group dynamics. Terrorism, Crenshaw insisted, is never an automatic reaction to conditions. But answering the question of why specific individuals engaged in political violence was a tough question (Crenshaw 1981: 390).

The insights of these early scholars of terrorism laid the foundation of what was to become a thriving research field, with a rapidly growing scholarly output in the first half of the 1980s. It was essentially the work of political scientists, but some psychologists too entered the field. The difficulties scholars were facing at the time included the small number of individuals to study, the near impossibility of interviewing them, the confusion and lack of consensus as to what exactly constituted terrorism, and the need for interdisciplinary research.

Nevertheless, the research led to a broad consensus on some findings and offered promising insights on trajectories, role models and beliefs that were flagged for further research. By the mid-1980s, most scholars in the field would agree that terrorism was the result of a complex interplay of factors. There was also broad consensus that no single terrorist profile existed, that terrorists were not necessarily the most destitute, and that psychiatric diagnoses were not particularly relevant (Corrado, 1981: 304).

But still, Martha Crenshaw (1986) argued in a review of the state of play concerning the psychology and motivations of terrorists and terrorist groups, the decision to join a terrorist group can be 'influenced or, in some cases, even determined by subconscious or later psychological motives'. The decision to become a terrorist often corresponds to personal needs, different from case to case. Some terrorists see it as an 'act of personal futility . . . when there is nowhere else to go' (Crenshaw 1986: 386). Others are seeking adventure or grandeur or see it as compensating for feelings of inferiority. Some are looking for recognition, acceptance, warmth, and solidarity.

For a majority of terrorists who are followers, Crenshaw makes clear, a dominant motive is to become a member of the group. Personal connections and relatives were of the essence in the process of joining a group, with the group becoming 'a family substitute' (Crenshaw 1986: 389–390). Becoming a terrorist was rarely a mere individual decision but was instead closely linked to group interactions. It was often the result of a gradual process and not a sudden conversion. But once a member of a group, the individual found that peer pressure within the group started to exert an inexorable influence, socializing them into its subculture, regulating all aspects of life, including the sexual relations of members. Embracing violence resulted from group pressure:

> The decision to use violence came only after association with the group, the choice was then between participating in violence or leaving the group. The individual who was already in need of the things a group could supply and who had over time become dependent on the group found it costly, in psychological terms, to go back (Crenshaw 1986: 389, 395).

A final broad consensus among terrorism scholars of the 1970s and 1980s concerned the role of ideology. Ideology was an important component of terrorism, but less than the general public or policymakers imagined: '. . . it is certainly not true that scratching a terrorist will necessarily reveal an ideologue,' Laqueur pointed out (1977b: 4). Sometimes it was mere 'camouflage', as was the case with almost all West-German RAF leaders (see Case Studies 6.1 and 9.1 for more), who never attempted to detail the future society they envisaged (Pridham 1981: 25).

Their 'ideology' was not so much a fixed set of axioms as a 'belief system': 'a set of lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received. It orients the individual to his environment, defining it for him and identifying for him its salient characteristics . . . In addition (. . .), the belief system has the function of the establishment of goals and the ordering of preferences.' (Holsti 1969: 544).

This brings the context back in. Many scholars subscribed to the view that terrorism cannot be studied in isolation from its political and social context (Crenshaw 1986: 384). 'Terrorism always assumes the protective colouring of certain features of the *Zeitgeist* (the defining mood of an epoch), which was fascist in the 1920s and 1930s but took a different direction in the 1960s and 1970s', Laqueur asserted (1977a). Though political terrorism was considered a transnational phenomenon, in individual countries it necessarily reflected 'local conditions, cultural and political no less than economic and social' (Furlong 1981: 60).

By the mid-1980s, the study of terrorism had thus received a real scholarly boost compared to previous decades. But this hadn't resulted in a straightforward answer to the question of what makes a terrorist. Results were disparate and non-cumulative. Important questions remained unanswered. Why did only some individuals become terrorists, while others with the same background did not? Mental illness was largely discredited as a satisfactory explanation, but it nevertheless 'continued to survive as a resilient source of inspiration on which to base theories' (Silke 1998: 53).

At this point terrorism research began to decline. A small group of terrorism scholars nevertheless pursued their research. Their contributions would bridge the 1970–1980s wave of terrorism studies with a new wave that emerged after the 9/11 attacks.

The Italian political sociologist Donatella Della Porta is one of them. Her comparative study of radical-left movements in Italy and West-Germany refined the integrated model Martha Crenshaw had sketched in 1981 (see also Chapter 6). She viewed terrorist groups as part of social movements and applied the earlier research on mass movements to the much smaller and more violent militant groups. In order to grasp their dynamics, all three levels of analysis should be explored simultaneously. External conditions are crucial in the emergence of political violence, the group level in its development and the individual level in gauging motivations and perceptions of the militants (Della Porta 1995: 187). Among the external conditions, her work concentrated on the state's policies. She viewed terrorism as a relational dynamics, determined by the interaction between state and protest movement. At the group and the individual levels, she explored how group dynamics shapes the minds of its members and forges militant identities, whereby the environment is framed as unfair, the state as the enemy and themselves as an heroic elite.

Terrorism as a complex phenomenon might be the best description of the state of play in the field of terrorism studies on the eve of the 20th century. While diverging on the relative importance of the different dimensions of the phenomenon, scholars broadly shared the overall assessment that it resulted from a complex interaction between personal characteristics, group dynamics, belief systems, and contextual factors.

10.4 THE ROAD TO RADICALIZATION

The attacks in New York of September 11, 2001 gave terrorism studies a renewed boost, surpassing the 1970s-1980s era in academic frenzy and scholarly output. 'Why do they hate us?' President George W. Bush rhetorically asked in his address to the joint session of Congress less than a week after the attacks. 'Root causes', the European Union asserted, have to be identified if we are to understand why 9/11 happened and prevent it from repeating itself (see Chapter 9 for more on Root Causes).

The terrorist organization al-Qaeda was perceived by authorities and security agencies in the West as a worldwide recruitment ring. The West was a target for al-Qaeda, as well as a 'place for recruitment and logistical support for jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya' (Europol 2004). Jihad literally means 'a struggle', and 'jihadism' is newly coined term in Western-languages to describe Islamic movements perceived as 'existentially threatening'. Al-Qaeda's foreign recruiters were targeting angry, vulnerable young people, especially in Europe's diasporic communities, who 'are often in search of their identity', the Dutch intelligence service AIVD alleged (AIVD 2002b: 10–11). By implanting 'extreme religious convictions' in young people's minds, recruiters sought to persuade them to participate in terrorist attacks (AIVD 2002a: 10, 18). In the United States, too, the 'key assumption . . . was that there was some mysterious process of indoctrination or brainwashing that transformed "vulnerable" or "at risk" *naïve* young people into fanatic killers' (Sageman 2014: 567).

The American forensic psychologist Randy Borum (2003) was the first to present a simplified model of the process that leads to the emergence of a terrorist mind-set. His model was intended to enable investigators to 'better identify persons who represent desirable candidates or recruitment [. . .], possible sites of indoctrination [. . .], and extremists or groups that may use violent tactics' (2003, 8) (see Figure 10.1). Echoing similar warnings from the pioneers of terrorism studies, he argued that: '[. . .] ideology may be *a* factor, but not necessarily *the* factor in determining motive' (2003, 9).

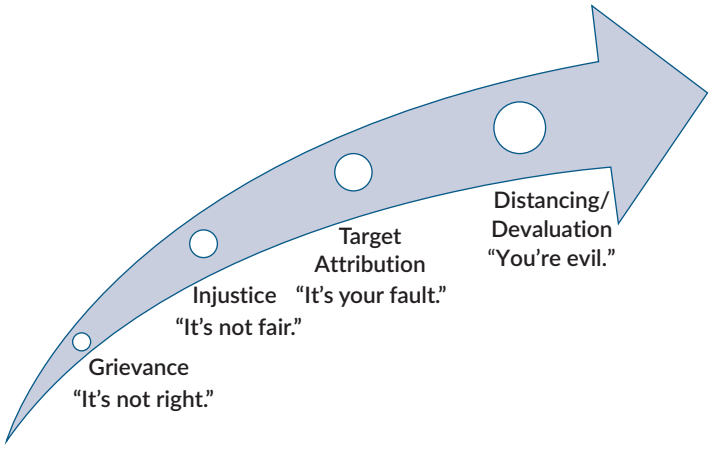

FIGURE 10.1 Borum's four-stage model of the terrorist mind-set. Source: Borum (2011).

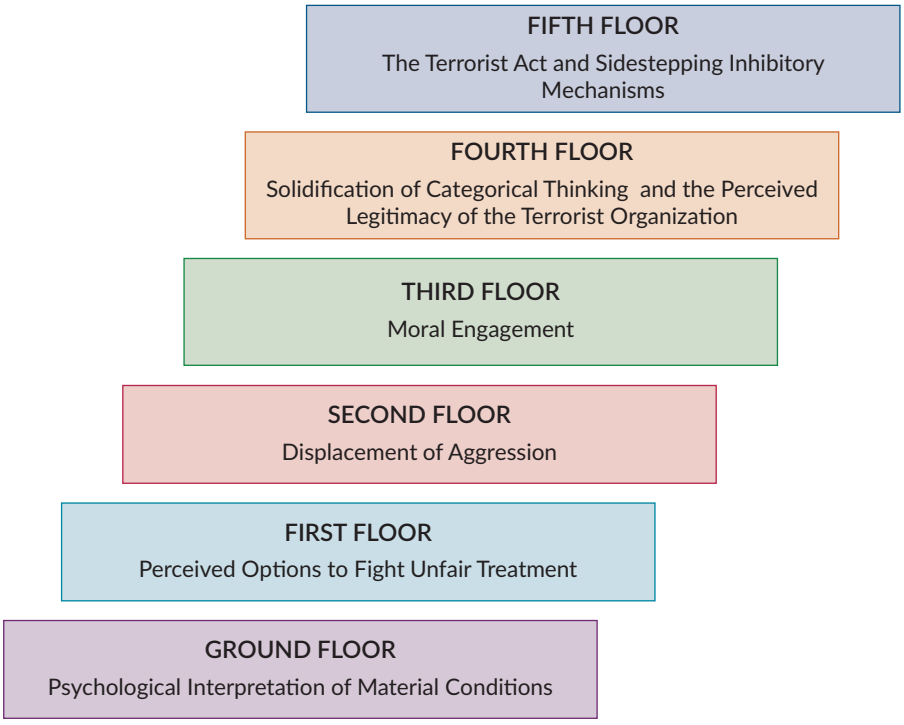

FIGURE 10.2 **Moghaddam's staircase to terrorism.** Source: Moghaddam, F. A. (2005).

A more elaborated model was offered by the American psychologist Fathali M. Moghaddam (2005). It became one of the most popular and influential representations of a staged process of 'radicalization'—even if this word was not yet widely used. Moghaddam offered a metaphor of an ever-narrowing staircase leading to the top of a building—terrorism (see Figure 10.2). On the ground floor, perceptions of fairness and feelings of relative deprivation dominate. Step-by-step, an individual, 'influenced by leaders', eventually gets recruited to terrorist organizations and might reach the top floor, where they are 'trained to sidestep inhibitory mechanisms that could prevent them from injuring and killing both others and themselves'.

Models grew rapidly more sophisticated when it became clear that engagement in terrorism did not necessarily result from foreign recruiters' efforts. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 had reinvigorated a waning jihadi scene. A new wave of radicals emerged. This wave was labelled 'home-grown'. It represented a bottom-up dynamic of small self-radicalizing groups and individuals not directed by al-Qaeda, but mobilized by outrage over the invasion. They essentially got involved through kinship and friendship bonds—a crucial dimension of terrorism that the pioneers of terrorism studies had identified decades earlier (see section 10.2).

In *Understanding Terror Networks*, the American scholar and former CIA case officer Marc Sageman offered a biographical study of 172 al-Qaeda members. His research not only confirmed the earlier findings that terrorists were not 'poor, desperate, naïve single young men from third world countries, vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into

terror' (Sageman 2004: 69), but also described how they typically joined the global jihad through pre-existing social bonds (family and friends), that often preceded ideological commitment to the cause of jihadism.

In Europe, the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, the assassination of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh in November 2004, and the London bombings of July 2005 redirected the focus from foreign recruitment to home-grown self-mobilization.

The murder of van Gogh was the action of a young second-generation Moroccan-Dutchman of Berber origin, who was part of a loose grouping of mostly Moroccan descent who had been born or raised in the Netherlands. The perpetrators of the Madrid bombings with their mixture of Spanish and foreign backgrounds did not conform to the standard terrorist profile of a fundamentalist Muslim extremist coming from abroad either. The four perpetrators of the 2005 London bombings were all British citizens, three of whom were born in Britain from parents who immigrated to the UK.

How did all these individuals come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? To what degree religion played a role, or feelings of discrimination? Something, it was argued, must turn a person from a 'normal' individual into a terrorist. Unpacking this became of paramount importance, lest European societies be undermined by a growing polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims and between natives and migrant communities, European officials feared (Coolsaet 2019: 36).

KEY CONCEPTS

Radicalization There is no agreed definition of radicalization. It can simply refer to an idea or a behaviour that is not mainstream. Historically, it referred to efforts to broaden the realm of democracy. Since 2004, it often is often associated with the process by which an individual becomes a terrorist, starting with embracing radical (extremist) ideas that inexorably pushes them down the road toward terrorist violence. Originally, it was thought that this pathway needed some time to develop (hence the idea of a 'process'), but now it appears that the decision to act is not necessarily preceded by a preliminary phase of acquiring radical ideas. When studying radicalization, sometimes all three levels of analysis (individual, group, conducive environment) are taken into account, but often the micro-level of the individual is privileged. It can be limited to ideas ('cognitive radicalization') or to action ('behavioural radicalization'), with the relationship between the two being subject to (scholarly and public) debate.

KEY CONCEPTS

Extremism Often conflated with radicalism. Extremism too has no universally agreed definition. While radicalism can function within the realm of democratic action, extremism projects itself outside this realm, by refusing diversity in opinion and the rule of law, as well as not rejecting the use of violence as a legitimate policy tool.

These attacks propelled a novel concept to centre stage in EU counterterrorism thinking and policies—radicalization. Until then, it had been loosely used to describe growing

expressions of anger and frustration among young people. In October 2004, the European Commission, for the very first time released a public paper that introduced the concept of 'radicalization' (European Commission 2004). Convinced of the need to address the root causes of this resurgence of terrorism, Commission officials nevertheless preferred to use the concept of 'radicalization', judging it to be more neutral (see Case Study 10.2).

CASE STUDY 10.2

The European Union at the Cradle of 'Radicalization'

Before 2004, the concept of radicalization wasn't part of the counterterrorism terminology. Within academia, the concept was hardly used. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it started to be loosely utilized by European police and intelligence officials as a synonym of 'anger' among young people in immigrant communities. What exactly was the source of this anger? Finding an answer to this question became all the more urgent after the terrorist attacks of March 2004 in Madrid which killed 193 people. European Commission officials were acutely aware that without tackling the 'root causes' of this anger, European societies risked being undermined by a growing polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims, between natives and migrant communities.

In May 2004, a confidential assessment of the 'underlying factors in the recruitment to terrorism' was elaborated. It was the very first time an EU document mentioned 'radicalization' in relation to terrorism. Radicalization was essentially understood as 'anger among Muslims or Islamists'. Its potential causes were considered wide-ranging: regional conflicts and failed or failing states (and the perception of Western double standards), globalization and socioeconomic factors, alienation, propagation of an extremist worldview, and of systems of education (madrasas).

A second confidential report, in November 2004, zoomed in on the personal trajectories of individuals. Doing so, it privileged an essentially ideological understanding of the process of radicalization, disconnected from the potential political, social, and economic causes of radicalization, identified in the first report as causes of anger.

In between these reports, in October 2004, the European Commission (EC) released *Prevention, Preparedness and Response to Terrorist Attacks*. This document contained the first public reference to 'radicalization', accompanied by the qualification 'violent'. EC officials were convinced that the root causes behind the current wave of 'Islamic terrorism' had to be addressed upstream, but they hesitated to use the words 'root causes', since they could be interpreted as condoning certain terrorist acts. They thus seized the opportunity offered by the novel concept of 'radicalization', judging it to be more neutral than 'root causes'.

They were evidently aware of the intricate, interlinked and complex nature of the label 'radicalization', by which individuals turn into terrorists. In 2006, the European Commission set up its 'Expert Group on Violent Radicalization' to establish the state of play of academic knowledge about radicalization. In its report, the group emphasized that the concept of 'radicalization' had originated in EU policy circles, and that it had not been widely used in social science.

Cautioning against its ambiguity, they suggested an alternative: 'socialization to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism'—although this was not widely adopted.

Among its main conclusions, the expert group confirmed that:

- Radicalization always takes place at the intersection of that enabling social environment and individual trajectories towards greater militancy;
- Individuals involved in terrorist activities exhibit a diversity of social backgrounds, undergo fairly diverse processes of violent radicalization and are influenced by various combinations of motivations;
- There is no single root cause for radicalization processes leading to terrorism, but a convergence of several contributing variables can usually be found at the origin of the radicalization process;
- Precipitant ('trigger') factors vary according to individual experience and personal pathways to radicalization;
- Personal experiences, kinship and bonds of friendship, as well as group dynamics, are critical in triggering the actual process of radicalization escalating to engagement in acts of terrorism against civilians (EC Expert Group 2008).

By the time the report was released in May 2008, the new concept of radicalization had gained traction, notwithstanding its ambiguity. Born as a Eurocentric concept, it has pervaded official and scholarly discourses beyond the West.

QUESTIONS

1. How to explain Europe's pioneering role in the emergence of 'radicalization' as a globally used concept?
2. Assess the possible overlap between 'radicalism' as a political and historical movement, and the premise that terrorism is the result of radicalization.

The notion of radicalization was contested from its very inception. Critics called it ill-defined, complex, and controversial. It nevertheless became the central terminology of counterterrorism, first in Europe and then worldwide. It became the dominant paradigm for addressing the old question of why and how individuals chose to join a terrorist group or to opt for terrorist violence.

In 2011–2012, a civil war in Syria muted into the largest jihadi mobilization ever, drawing tens of thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world to the Middle East. By then, explanatory models had become more multifaceted to catch up with the growing realization that the earlier staged process models (see Figures 10.1 and 10.2) were no longer adequate. Scholars began to opt for multi-factor dynamics which involved a considerable amount of variables and mechanisms.

The American social psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko presented a set of mechanisms of radicalization at the individual, group, and mass levels that could

generate a wide variety of combinations pushing individuals into a radicalization pathway (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, 2017). But, they insisted that there are two kinds of radicalization—radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action. The relationship between these two is weak, since radical ideology is not a 'conveyor belt' that mechanically moves an individual on to violent action, contrary to the popular image. McCauley and Moskalenko thus confirmed an earlier observation of the 1970s and 1980s: not all individuals carrying radical ideas are willing to act upon these ideas and use violence to impose them.

In *Leaderless Jihad* (2008) Marc Sageman (Sageman 2008) pursued his investigation into the bottom-up mobilization into terror networks through kinship and friendship bonds—a 'bunch of guys', as he labelled it (2008: 66-69). He viewed radicalization as a dynamics including four 'prongs', that interact in a non-linear way: moral outrage about the way Muslims worldwide are being treated; interpretation that this is part of a war on Islam, constituting a mobilizing narrative; resonance of this perception with one's personal experience of discrimination; and, finally, mobilization of a small number of those who share this perception through networks of kin and friends.

Explicitly rejecting models based upon an orderly sequence of steps that produce an output, the American scholars Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins proposed an alternative metaphor of a 'puzzle', consisting of four pieces or factors that come together to produce violent radicalization: personal and collective grievances; networks and interpersonal ties; political and religious ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures (Hafez and Mullins 2015).

KEY CONCEPTS

CVE 'Countering Violent Extremism' was adopted by the US State Department at the start of the Obama Presidental administration (2009) as an acronym for the US global counter-terrorism approach, with 'violent extremism' as an alternative for 'terrorism'. It was based on the recognition that even the best 'intelligence operations and law enforcement efforts alone' would not be sufficient in countering the 'long-term challenge'. The aim of CVE was to 'make environments non-permissive for terrorists seeking to exploit them'. This required a broad range of 'non-coercive' instruments, such as messaging, capacity-building, outreach to civil society and educational campaigns. In August 2011, it was broadened to designate also the domestic counter-radicalization programme of the US government. The domestic CVE strategy of the Obama administration explicitly stated: 'Violent extremists prey on the disenchantment and alienation that discrimination creates, and they have a vested interest in anti-Muslim sentiment.' (2011, available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/empowering_local_partners.pdf)

PVE Stands for Preventing Violent Extremism. Launched in December 2015 by the United Nations, it essentially covers the same wide-ranging agenda as CVE under the Obama administration. By adopting the acronym 'PVE', the United Nations wanted to distinguish itself from the American programme.

In short, the post 9/11 research on terrorism developed new concepts and tools that systematized the early observations and insights since the late 19th century. But did these allow for a definitive answer to the question of why someone becomes a terrorist?

10.5 WHAT DO WE NOW KNOW—AND WHAT DON'T WE KNOW (YET)?

With hindsight, the concept of radicalization has been less helpful at explaining individual motivations than its European advocates envisaged in 2004. A wide gap looms between scholarly understanding and its everyday public and political use. Contrary to early expectations, we're no closer to a one-size-fits-all model which explains why and how individuals become terrorists. Identifying them as 'radicalized' is not very helpful, since many others sharing the same ideas never go beyond this point. At a more general level, no metrics have ever been developed to measure radicalization.

But the huge increase in funding, the massive output of scholarly studies, and the availability of more hard data and primary sources than ever before (through interviews, intercepted communication and social media analyses, testimonies of (former) terrorists, courtroom documents, journalistic accounts and statistical evidence) have made it possible to test the exploratory insights originating in the early days of terrorism research. More solid research methodologies have been developed and the involvement of a wider pool of scholars with different academic backgrounds has resulted in fewer impressionistic frameworks.

There is now a broad research-supported consensus that involvement in terrorism results from an interaction of personal trajectories with group dynamics and contextual factors. As far as the latter is concerned, empirical studies have led to robust findings that:

> 'Group-based feelings of injustice reliably predict collective action. However, two specifications must be highlighted here. First, it is the emotions elicited by the injustice—not only the cognitive awareness of the injustice—that predict collective action. Second, it is group-based relative deprivation, as opposed to personal deprivation, that predicts collective action' (King and Taylor 2011: 610).

That an individual isn't part of a group that experiences the injustice is therefore less important in explaining their turn to terrorism than the fact that they identify with another group's grievances.

It will always remain a thorny issue to relate context to individual motivations and behaviour. Moreover, it is not easy to compare granular analyses of local and regional contexts in widely different parts of the world. As a result, many radicalization studies have zoomed in on the micro-level of individual processes (Sedgwick 2010: 480–481). This de-contextualization of individual behaviour was a step backwards, compared to the broad

consensus among the pioneers of terrorism studies that joining and bonding in a terrorist group did not happen in a vacuum.

One has to bear in mind, however, that terrorism is not an automatic response to a given context (Crenshaw 1981: 389). Other factors need to come into play for terrorism to emerge. As scholars such as Martha Crenshaw have been suggesting since the 1970s and 1980s, it is now well established that group processes and social bonds are a crucial ingredient. Involvement in terrorism is as much an individual choice as the result of exposure to a specific social environment and peer influence.

Radicalization studies have deepened our understanding of what happens to individuals once they get involved in a group. In most cases, the process of socialization into extremism and eventually, into terrorism, happens gradually. Jihadi plots by small hubs and so-called 'lone actors' alike, in particular from 2015 onwards, have challenged earlier assumptions that the socialization process always needed time to mature into action. A number of terrorist plotters literally jumped from drug trafficking and petty crime or living a 'normal' life into a jihadi plot without any protracted process. This has also been noted with left-wing and right-wing terrorists. In fact, before these individuals decided to act, there was not much of a 'radicalization process' going on.

This observation is connected to another broad consensus, which also confirms an insight from the 1970s and 1980s: there is no single profile and no uniform trajectory into terrorism. No specific 'terrorist mindset' has ever been found. And contrary to what some early radicalization studies assumed, personal trajectories or pathways are murky processes that are neither fixed nor predetermined, but highly individualized and non-linear (Emmerson 2016). It is thus problematic to try to generalize personal trajectories and capture them in one-size-fits-all radicalization models. This observation also implies that the risk assessment tools which have been developed since the 2000s to evaluate the risks and vulnerabilities an individual represents for sliding into terrorism, are to be taken with great caution.

KEY CONCEPTS

Deradicalization and Disengagement Deradicalization generally refers to efforts at changing the way an individual thinks, i.e. bringing one to abandon extremist ideas. This is considered to be a challenging endeavour, in particular when pursued by authorities. **Disengagement** in turn refers to efforts to alter an individual's attitude towards the use of violence in pursuit of their ideas.

Mental illness is now largely discarded as an explanation. This observation too rests on a broad scholarly consensus. But the debate is still ongoing on how personal characteristics enter into the equation. There is broad consensus, based upon empirical studies, that among 'lone actors' the number of individuals with mental disorders of different kinds

tends to be significantly higher than among members of structured terrorist groups and than people on average. From his detailed study of the data in the Dutch police files on individuals who left for Syria and Iraq after 2012, Anton Weenink concluded that individuals who experienced adversity and distress, or had mental health issues or with criminal pasts, seem to have been relatively more susceptible to radicalization (and other forms of delinquency) than their age-matched peers (Weenink 2019). But exactly how these characteristics relate to their decision to travel to Syria and engage in jihadi groups, remains an open question.

There is also strong evidence that terrorists who perpetrate attacks in their own country and (at least some of the) foreign fighters are not to be lumped together in one and the same category. The Norwegian scholar Thomas Hegghammer found that 'a majority of Western jihadis choose foreign fighting over domestic fighting, most likely because they have come to view the former as more legitimate' (Hegghammer 2013: 8). It echoes an observation Walter Laqueur had already offered in the 1970s: 'terror is always far more popular against foreigners than against one's own countrymen' (1976: 104). This is supported by the fact that the vast majority of returnees from Syria and Iraq have not been involved in terrorist plots upon their return to their home countries.

Finally, a last area of broad consensus among scholars concerns the weak relationship between ideas and action, or between cognitive and behavioural radicalization—even if policymakers often continue to simplify terrorism into a question of ideology and still view radicalization as embracing extremist ideas that then pushes an individual inexorably into terrorism. In academia the 'conveyor belt' theory is now largely discredited. But at the same time, most scholars acknowledge that ideology (alternatively called 'narrative' or 'discourse') plays a role in terrorism. How exactly it relates to terrorism remains matter of febrile discussion. To some, ideology is merely camouflage and a justification of violence in search of a cause (which, in some cases, it undoubtedly is). To others, it chiefly serves as a means of cementing group cohesiveness and identity. Still others will consider ideology as the last straw that helps individuals overcome their inhibitions about killing innocent people. Finally, some do consider ideology as a key driver of terrorism, albeit with some variance. Some judge it to be an indispensable transit station before the commitment of terrorist acts, while others emphasize that it is not by itself a root cause, but only when it meets specific outside conditions.

10.6 IN THE END, WHAT MAKES A TERRORIST?

For more than a century now, scholars and observers have been trying to understand what makes a terrorist. Why, how and when do individuals become terrorists (see Figure 10.3)? The study of terrorism has developed in successive waves. It is common to highlight scholarly differences and competing paradigms among students of terrorism. Taking a bird's-eye

FIGURE 10.3 What makes a terrorist?

view, however, it appears—a bit surprisingly perhaps—that over the decades the study of terrorism has reached broad but real scholarly consensus on some of the key variables that play a crucial role in the making of a terrorist. For sure, discussions and debates are ongoing and gaps in our knowledge exist. But what we do know, is that an individual does not embrace political violence in a void. And, most crucially, that there are as many trajectories into terrorism as there are individuals.

Reviewing the literature on radicalization, Alex Schmid (2013), former Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN and editor of the journal *Perspectives on Terrorism*, noted that 'the popularity of the concept of "radicalization" stands in no direct relationship to its actual explanatory power regarding the root causes of terrorism'. The propensity to focus on 'vulnerable' young people and on the individual level has produced inconclusive results. He therefore suggested re-conceptualizing radicalization as a socialization and mobilization process, usually in a situation of political polarization, whereby one or both sides show 'a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging'. He also pleaded for the integration of the individual micro-level into an overall approach including the group level of the radical milieu as well as the macro-level of structural factors in and between societies and states.

Starting from this observation and fusing the insights offered by the founders of the study of terrorism with the contemporary research on radicalization, terrorism can be conceptualized as the interplay between a conducive environment, an opportunity, an ideology and group dynamics. Take away any of these dimensions and no terrorism campaign will be able to emerge and certainly not to sustain itself. It is in this dynamic interplay that people radicalize, with some going to the extreme choice of considering violence at the only adequate way to act.

Conducive environment—The specifics of contextual factors (also called 'push' factors or preconditions) may differ from one form of terrorism to another and vary according to time and place. But the cocktail of social malaise, perceived injustice and existential threat to a segment of society appears to be a, if not the, crucial push factor behind the successive waves of transnational terrorism since the 1880s. Group-based dissatisfaction with the existing order certainly has been an important dimension of the conducive environment that allowed jihadism to prosper. It is not about the material aspect of it per se (poverty, discrimination), but about the emotions elicited by such an environment—frustration, anger, perceived threat to a group's identity, and, crucially, a polarized Us vs. Them social context, whereby a specific group within society is 'othered' and so portrayed as a suspect community. Who the Other is, depends upon the local and national contexts, but the Manichean mechanism itself is the same on all continents and in all countries.

Opportunity—A conducive environment does not automatically lead to terrorism. But it potentially creates the space for competing offers promising to deal with the source of the dissatisfaction. These can range from modestly reformist to very radical. They can be nonviolent or violent. In this arena of political competition, the most credible offer is stand to win the largest following. In case the violent offer gains momentum, it acts as a 'pull factor' that not only encompasses a (self-proclaimed) vanguard that believes it can arouse the masses by its actions; it also requires promising signs that history is on its side and the proclaimed goal within reach. This offer has to be perceived as credible, as riding the tailwind of history, with real-world events seemingly confirming that revolutionary change is imminent.

Ideology—A narrative is needed to mobilize a large group of individuals. Ideology is here understood as a belief system—a set of lenses through which the environment is framed, the dissatisfaction articulated and violence identified as the only adequate response. The ideological factor is all about the credibility of the narrative, not about doctrinal fine print. Its capacity to mobilize is contingent on outside conditions. It must also be able to tap into the aforementioned emotions. When an overarching narrative can wrap a range of individual motivations into a collective storyline and a shared perception of injustice and group-based anger, its mobilization and socialization power can be consequential—at least for a certain amount of time.

Local mobilization hubs—For terrorism to take root, a physical link has to be established between a conducive environment, the offer and the narrative. Kinship and friendship ties are key components of the socialization process that leads individuals into terrorism.

Mobilization via pre-existing social bonds is a solid finding of decades of research. Such 'bunches of guys' make the difference between street gangs and terrorist groups. An individual joining a given group evolves with the group of which they are part. Such hubs form cohesive counterculture in-groups that enhance the emotional dimension of getting involved in the cause. Groupthink and peer pressure can gradually socialize the members of the group into extremism and, eventually, terrorism. Personal characteristics will influence the roles and functions individuals assume in these group interactions. Without such terrorism-oriented hubs, individuals seldom link up with terrorism in large numbers. Lone actors exist, but in most cases they see themselves as acting on behalf of a community at risk.

10.7 CONCLUSION

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon. How individuals get involved in it, is even more complex. This observation is neither new nor original. We have to resist simple answers, models and diagnoses. No one chooses to become a terrorist by simply viewing an extremist video. What we do know is that one does not become a terrorist in a void. The decision to perpetrate a terrorist attack or to join a terrorist group is as much an individual decision as the result of the interplay of contextual factors, kinship and friendship dynamics, belief systems, and personal trajectories. These factors do not play in the same way for all individuals. Routes into terrorism are as varied as there are individuals—but all these factors need to be present for terrorism to emerge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there any practical difference between political and religious narratives in the process of radicalization of individuals?
2. How would you assess the conducive environment that allowed for the emergence of left-wing terrorism in the United States and in Europe in the 1970s-1980s?
3. How can you elucidate that ISIS (Daesh, Islamic State) has been able to attract more than 40,000 volunteers with widely different backgrounds and from very different locations in the world to join its ranks?
4. What might make extremists change their mind with regard to the ideas they hold? And what might make them change their attitude towards the use of violence?
5. How can you explain that so few people end up becoming terrorists, while so many grow up in the same circumstance as those who decide to become terrorists? Does the same observation also apply to national liberation movements?

Visit the online resources for pointers on how to answer the discussion questions, links to useful web sources, and guidance on accessing databases:
www.oup.com/he/Wilson-Muro1e

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Bjørgo, T. and Horgan, J. (2009) *Leaving Terrorism behind. Individual and Collective Disengagement*. New York: Routledge. ***A collection of essays on how disengagement from terrorism works (of fails) in many parts of the world.***

Crenshaw, M. (1981) 'The causes of terrorism', *Comparative Politics*, 13/4: 379–399. ***A pioneering grand theory on the emergence of terrorism.***

McCauley, C. and Moskalenko, S. (2011) *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*. Oxford: University Press. ***Historical analysis of the mechanisms of radicalization by two leading social psychologists.***

Neumann, P. (2016) *Radicalized. New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris. ***Explaining the dynamics behind the ISIS mobilization of thousands of Western youngsters.***

Schmid, A. (2013) *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. The Hague: ICCT Research Paper, March (https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalization-De-Radicalization-Counter-Radicalization-March-2013.pdf). ***A state of play on 'radicalization' and its re-conceptualization as a socialization and mobilization process.***

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