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The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation and Countering Radicalisation

Edited by Joel Busher, Leena Malkki, and
Sarah Marsden

THE ROUTLEDGE
HANDBOOK ON
RADICALISATION
AND COUNTERING
RADICALISATION

*Edited by Joel Busher, Leena Malkki,
and Sarah Marsden*

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3

‘RADICALISATION’ AND ‘COUNTERING RADICALISATION’

The emergence and expansion of a contentious concept

Rik Coolsaet

Introduction

‘Radicalisation’ has become the primary prism for understanding and countering terrorism. To many, terrorism as the result of a ‘radicalisation process’ is an unquestioned axiom and considered self-evident. But the concept does not have a long pedigree, neither in academia nor in counterterrorism policies. In relation to terrorism, it only emerged after the 9/11 attacks and, in particular, after the string of attacks that struck Europe in 2004 and 2005. Contrary to the concept itself, however, the questions it seeks to answer are as old as terrorism: Why and how does one become a terrorist? What makes a terrorist? What motivates people to join terrorist groups? When do they embrace violence to advance political objectives? What is the trigger that makes an individual cross the threshold between holding extremist ideas and actually using violence?

Has the new concept succeeded in giving better answers to the old questions? This will be the common thread throughout the chapter. The chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will reconstruct the emergence of the concept as a political construct and describe how and why academia and think tanks subsequently embraced the concept. The role of the European Union has been crucial throughout this process.

Countering radicalisation rapidly became the holy grail of European counterterrorism. From the outset, however, scholars have been warning about its contentious nature as well as its potential for politicisation. The chapter will then turn to the key debates in radicalisation studies, which echo similar debates in the era of terrorism studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Inevitably, these debates had direct relevance for the elaboration of policies devised to counter radicalisation.

Conceived in Europe, the radicalisation paradigm went global, in particular after the United States launched, in 2011, its own parallel concept, ‘CVE’, for ‘Countering Violent Extremism’, followed by the UN and its ‘PVE’, for ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’. Many countries adopted the new idioms, but not always with the same goal of addressing the environment that allowed radicalisation to emerge.

Finally, the chapter will return to the initial question of whether the new concept of radicalisation has resulted in a better understanding terrorism and, in particular, individual motivations. And have the numerous de-radicalisation and CVE initiatives contributed to higher-performing counterterrorism policies? With hindsight, the new idioms have been less of a conceptual breakthrough

than initially anticipated, but progress has nevertheless been made in understanding how individuals get involved in terrorism. Countering radicalisation, on the other hand, still remains very much mired in ambiguity and work in progress.

A quick march through the European institutions

'Radicalisation' is commonly understood as the process through which individuals and groups get involved in terrorism. For more than a century, scholars and observers have been trying to apprehend what makes a terrorist. But 'radicalisation' was not part of their vocabulary. Nor did it belong to the toolkit of counterterrorism policies:

No one talked of the IRA being radicalised, or Shining Path, or Black September or the Red Brigades. Though all of these older groups certainly were by our modern understanding.

(Silke & Brown, 2016)

If the word 'radicalisation' was used at all, it was generally in its generic sense, describing individuals or groups moving away from an assumed mainstream position in the pursuit of their goals. It was applied to ideas as well as to action. It was somehow synonymous with activism, protesting, and extremism. It was in that loose sense that some European intelligence services and police officers at the start of the 2000s used it to describe growing expressions of anger and frustration among young people in diasporic and Muslim communities in Europe (Europol, 2004, p. 30).

The Dutch domestic intelligence agency Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD, General Intelligence and Security Agency) was among the first to attempt to identify the root cause of this anger. In a public assessment in December 2002, the agency opined that many young men of Moroccan origin, aged between 18 and 31, born in the Netherlands or who had grown up there from early childhood, were vulnerable to indoctrination and manipulation by foreign extremists. Unsure about their identity and blaming Dutch society for not respecting who they were, they were said to be easy prey to recruiters. This report followed an incident whereby two Dutch young men of Moroccan origin travelled to Kashmir, where they were soon killed in combat. An investigation by the AIVD discovered that they had been recruited in the Netherlands by 'radical Muslims', who 'spiritually prepared [them] to participate in the violent jihad' (AIVD, 2002, pp. 5, 9).

In the immediate post-9/11 period, Western intelligence services commonly depicted Al-Qaeda as a worldwide organised recruitment ring targeting vulnerable young people to join foreign war zones (AIVD, 2002; Europol, 2004; Sageman, 2014, p. 567). But the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to an unintended but dramatic change in the terrorism scene, transforming it from an external security challenge into a domestic threat.

According to the official American rationale, the invasion of Iraq was about fighting the terrorists in Iraq and across the world so that Western countries did not have to face them at home. Instead, the Iraq war enhanced the burgeoning anger among youngsters, as intelligence services and police officers in the field observed. It generated and mobilised a new generation of radicals, outraged by the invasion. Worldwide, thousands of volunteers travelled to Iraq (about 100 came from Europe). By adding a new layer of frustration within Muslim communities worldwide, it also pushed jihadi terrorism into a new dimension: it was rapidly becoming a decentralised, largely home-grown patchwork of scattered jihadi groups, linked by a common world view and opportunistic links, and recruitment was a rather spontaneous local process, developing through pre-existing kinship and friendship bonds (Pillar, 2004; COREU, 2004a, 2004c; Sageman, 2004, pp. 99–135; Coolsaet, 2007, p. 9; AIVD, 2007, p. 18; Malthaner, 2017).

The need to understand what was going on became all the more urgent when a string of terrorist attacks struck Europe. Unlike the 9/11 attacks, the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, the murder of the Dutch movie director Theo van Gogh in November, and the 7 July 2005 London bombings were not perpetrated by foreign terrorists or organised by Al-Qaeda. Most of the attackers originated from immigrant communities who grew up in Europe and were often born there. The attacks triggered a scramble for answers to the century-old question of why and how individuals came to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen.

Some European officials were convinced that this changing face of terrorism would put Europe's social fabric at risk since such attacks boosted radical-right political parties, xenophobia, and nativism. As a result, European societies would be polarised between natives and migrant communities and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Officials at the European Commission and in the European Council Secretariat started actively pushing member states to address the 'root causes' of this anger among young people. Upstream prevention, through the identification of the underlying factors that could lead to (recruitment to) terrorism, became their leitmotiv.

Two months after the Madrid attacks, the two standing counterterrorism committees of the European Union issued their first ever joint (confidential) assessment of the potential causes of this 'anger'. They were wide-ranging (and not put in any specific order of priority, nor really operationalised): regional conflicts and failed or failing states (and the perception of Western double standards), globalisation and socioeconomic factors, alienation, propagation of an extremist worldview, and systems of education (madrasas). Addressing specifically the alienation of youngsters in Europe, the report stated:

Within Europe, young Muslims may often feel themselves to be subject to discrimination and participate relatively little in mainstream politics and public life. In this context of sometimes real grievances, a lack of any real opportunities to effect change or vent frustration and a consequent sense of anger and helplessness, the unambiguous messages of extremist propaganda can become very attractive, particularly to the youth population.

(COREU, 2004a, para 7)

It was the very first time an official (albeit confidential) EU document mentioned 'radicalisation' in relation to terrorism. The report warned that the 'processes by which individuals are drawn into terrorism [were] very complex. . . . Accordingly, generalisations must be viewed with great caution':

Recruitment to terrorist organisations is preceded, in many cases, by a process of radicalisation, where an individual may become attracted to extremist ideologies. There are a number of factors that may contribute to this, although the specific process of radicalisation can vary from individual to individual.

(COREU, 2004a, para 4)

In October 2004, echoing this assessment, the European Commission released its first public paper introducing the concept of 'radicalisation', accompanied by the qualification 'violent' (European Commission, 2004). Speaking of 'disrupting the conditions facilitating the recruitment of terrorists', it announced its intention to draw upon existing academic expertise to help sort out 'where European policies and instruments can play a preventive role against violent radicalisation'.

The two EU counterterrorism committees drew up a second joint report in November 2004 (COREU, 2004b). This one zoomed in on the personal trajectories of individuals and privileged

ideological factors as the sources of eventual anger over the contextual factors that had been prominent in their first report. Focusing on the process an individual undergoes from his or her original 'normal' status to becoming a terrorist, the November report insisted that it tended to take place via loosely connected networks and individuals rather than through specific organisations dedicated to the task. The original emphasis on the role of an external recruiter actively taking the lead in the process of radicalisation had now given way to 'endogenous factors (that) have an increasing influence on radicalisation'. While contextual factors were not entirely neglected – underlying factors such as social deprivation or lack of integration were indeed briefly mentioned – the emphasis was clearly on ideological factors as the key drivers of (self)radicalisation (COREU, 2004b, para A).

The July 2005 bombings in London further boosted counterterrorism work and thinking at EU level. Radicalisation as a prism for understanding and countering terrorism was now rapidly gaining traction within EU counterterrorism thinking. But officials were aware that it was an extremely complex issue. The endeavour was deemed worth the effort, though: if one could understand the process individuals undergo in their slide towards terrorism, it was assumed, timely interventions could be devised to prevent this from happening.

The rapidly expanding use of the concept of 'violent radicalisation' did, however, not imply that everybody thought along the same lines. Still, no univocally agreed definition or its causes were agreed upon. The first EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gijs de Vries recalls that 'at the time the EU Strategy was adopted [2005, RC] Member States did not agree about what constitutes radicalisation, or what causes it':

Faced with the lack of consensus [on radicalisation] among prevention analysts and practitioners, the EU has opted for open-ended formulations. The latest Commission document on radicalisation, for example, does not provide a definition of radicalisation. As to drivers, it notes that these 'may include' a strong sense of personal or cultural alienation, perceived injustice or humiliation reinforced by social marginalisation, xenophobia and discrimination, limited education or employment possibilities, criminality, political factors as well as an ideological and religious dimension, unstructured family ties, personal trauma and other psychological problems. The Commission is right: radicalisation may indeed include any or all of these factors. The trouble is that policy-makers and practitioners are left none the wiser. (De Vries, 2021, pp. 236–237)

That bewildering array of topics under the umbrella of 'radicalisation' was aptly summarised by Peter Neumann, founder of the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, as 'what goes on before the bomb goes off' (ICSR, 2008). In 2004–5, the European discussions on radicalisation thus went in all directions. Some Member States subscribed to the UK view that considered ideology the major driving force of radicalisation. This allowed authorities to set aside possible domestic drivers: 'For politicians and many policy makers, ideology is a magical, formless, mostly-Islamic force that bends vulnerable minds toward violence' (Berger, 2017).

Most governments were adamant that the emphasis should be on preparedness and repression. But a small number of Member States, together with the Commission and the Council Secretariat, were adamant about addressing contextual factors as part of a long-term strategy for countering radicalisation and recruitment into terrorism, according to one of the participants in these discussions (Rietjens, 2007).

In December 2005, the EU heads of state and government officially adopted the 'EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy' (European Council, 2005a). It closely mirrored the structure of the UK's previously adopted counter-terrorism strategy. It had taken some discussion among the Member States,

but by identifying ‘Prevent’ (‘preventing people turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment, in Europe and internationally’) as the primary strategic objective, the EU clearly stressed the preventive work that needed to be undertaken to successfully combat terrorism in the long term.

As part and parcel of this new overall strategy, the European Council simultaneously adopted the ‘Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism’, thus confirming that radicalisation had become one of the central threads in Europe’s ‘root cause’ approach to counterterrorism. This document called for a better understanding of the ‘motives behind such a decision [i.e. to become involved in terrorism]’ and for a way to ‘identify and counter the ways, propaganda and conditions through which people are drawn into terrorism and consider it a legitimate course of action’ (European Council, 2005b). The strategy acknowledged that within the Union, too, structural factors could exist that might create disaffection and susceptibility to the overtures of extremists, such as social and economic inequalities among relevant minority groups.

By now, radicalisation had become the holy grail of European counterterrorism. It was commonly referred to in official documents and speeches. It was picked up in media reporting. It was taken for granted and considered self-evident. But it was not.

With hindsight, one can indeed see how competing paradigms about the drivers of radicalisation were pulling the discussions in different directions without the participants really being aware of it. What was not clear at that time either was the divergence in policies that would flow from these competing paradigms. If contextual factors were of the essence, then upstream prevention through a whole-of-government effort had to be developed, encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism, the place of religion in Europe, and social cohesion, and stitching it all together in a broadened security agenda. If ideology – or rather an extremist interpretation of religion – was the crucial driver, countering radicalisation was essentially a war of ideas through the promotion of ‘moderate Islam’ (whatever that may mean) to combat the negative influence of ‘radical Islam’. If recruitment by foreigners was seen as the core issue, then counter-radicalisation essentially rested with the security services. And if foreign policies were involved in the radicalisation process, then the effect of domestic policy changes would be marginal.

The early debates on radicalisation had been largely limited to officials from the Commission, the Secretariat, and the EU member states, with little to no involvement of scholars. The results were not judged satisfactory. Commission officials realised that, contrary to the popular and public appeal of the new concept, not much was known about what happened in the black box labelled ‘radicalisation’ or what exactly made an environment conducive to radicalisation. They also acknowledged that the relationship between ideas and action, between radicalisation and terrorism, was poorly understood. Past studies on why, how, and when individuals became involved in terrorism had indeed never produced definite answers or operational policy options. In 2006, the Commission reached out to the scholarly community.

Academia joins in

In April 2006, the European Commission set up the very first ‘Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation’. Its officials hoped to plug into the existing academic knowledge on radicalisation to bring some order to the chaotic discussions and to suggest policy advice for countering violent radicalisation. They defined violent radicalisation as ‘the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism’. They were fully aware that this was ‘a very complex question with no simple answers and which requires a cautious, modest and well-thought [out] approach’ (European Commission, 2005). The Expert Group was given the mandate

to establish a preliminary contribution on the state of knowledge on violent radicalisation. Originally planned for June 2006, it was only by mid-May 2008 that the final report was submitted to the Commission (Expert Group, 2008).

The report confirmed the obvious: the concepts of 'radicalisation' and 'violent radicalisation' had originated in EU policy circles after the 2004 Madrid bombing, and had not been widely used in social science. Moreover, there was no uniform usage of the terms 'radicalisation' and 'violent radicalisation' in the academic literature. The experts also voiced some misgivings about the very concept. They considered the term 'violent radicalisation' potentially 'misleading' because 'the socialisation process itself [leading to the use of violence] does not have to be 'violent' and even 'socialisation into violence is not necessarily co-terminous with socialisation into terrorism'. 'Radicalisation', in turn, is problematic, they argued, 'in that its relationship to 'radicalism' as an expression of legitimate political thought, still reflected in the titles of some political parties in Europe, is confusing'. The Expert Group also concluded that there 'are . . . remarkable parallels between radicalisation to current jihadist terrorism and radicalisation to left-wing, right-wing or nationalist separatist terrorism'. Warning against its apparent simplicity and political exploitation, they offered an alternative wording: 'socialisation to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism'.

By the time the Expert Group's report was submitted to the Commission, the first academic contributions on the topic had begun to appear. Scholars had been studying involvement in terrorism for decades, but the search for trajectories, individual traits, and specific profiles had been inconclusive (Kellen, 1979; Taylor, 1988; Horgan, 2008). While not referring to the novel concept of radicalisation that was being debated in the EU, the American forensic psychologist Randy Borum was the first to present a simplified model of a four-stage 'process of ideological development' that led to the emergence of a terrorist mindset. 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'. Echoing similar warnings from the pioneers of terrorism studies in the 1970s and 1980s, he argued that 'ideology may be *a* factor, but not necessarily *the* factor in determining motive' (Borum, 2003).

A more elaborate model was offered by the American psychologist Fathali M. Moghaddam in 2005. It became one of the most popular and influential representations of a staged process of 'radicalisation'. Moghaddam offered the metaphor of an ever-narrowing staircase leading to the top of a building – terrorism. 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 organisations 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, and those selected are equipped and sent to carry out terrorist acts' (Moghaddam, 2005).

While not exactly a model, the Turkish-American scholar Zeyno Baran offered an appealing metaphor of non-violent Islamist organisations, whose 'radical ideology' acts as a 'conveyor belt' that encourages, seemingly irresistibly, 'frustrated youth who have lost faith in the systems of the countries to which they or their parents came' to become terrorists (Baran, 2005).

In these and other early models and approaches, committed organisations played a key role in a gradual process of sequential steps through which individuals were lured into the use of violence. But the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent mobilisation of a new generation of angry young men, willing to seek revenge for the invasion of yet another Muslim country, showed the limits of the existing models since no professional recruitment ring was involved. Radicalisation models grew in complexity, involving multi-factor dynamics with a considerable number of variables and mechanisms.

American scholar and former CIA case officer Marc Sageman confirmed earlier findings from the 1980s that individuals typically joined the global jihad through pre-existing social bonds that often preceded ideological commitment to the cause of jihadism (Sageman, 2004). He coined the term ‘bunch of guys’ to that effect. He defined radicalisation as the dynamics of 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 mobilising narrative; resonance of this perception with one’s personal experience of discrimination; and, finally, mobilisation of a small number of those who share this perception through networks of kin and friends (Sageman, 2008a).

The American social psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko in turn tried to solve a long-standing and tricky issue in the study of terrorism: how do radical ideas and radical action relate. Many share radical ideas, but only a handful cross the threshold to action. They suggested distinguishing between two kinds of radicalisation: radicalisation of opinion and radicalisation of action. The relationship between these two is weak since, according to them, radical ideology is not a ‘conveyor belt’ that mechanically moves an individual on to violent action. They came up with a complex set of mechanisms of radicalisation at the individual, group, and mass levels that could generate a wide variety of combinations, pushing individuals into a radicalisation pathway (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, 2011, 2017).

The successive mobilisations of foreign volunteers following the invasion of Iraq and even more so in the Syrian civil war (with some 5,500 Europeans involved) offered a dramatic real-life test case for the radicalisation models. Research into the phenomenon of foreign fighters was revived (Malet, 2015, p. 2; Hegghammer, 2013; Duyvesteyn & Peeters, 2015). Simultaneous jihadi plots by small hubs and so-called lone-actor attacks alike, in particular in 2015–6, further triggered a huge surge in scholarly endeavours trying to come to grips with the dynamics of radicalisation.

Radicalisation studies multiplied, widened, and deepened. Earlier assumptions that radicalisation always needed time to mature into action were challenged. A number of Syrian travellers and jihadi plotters indeed jumped literally from living a normal life or from drug trafficking and petty criminality into the jihadi scene without a protracted process of radicalisation. Other studies identified local environments as a key variable in radicalisation, a neglected dimension in terrorism and radicalisation studies (Rosenblatt, 2016; Dodwell et al., 2016). New research also strongly suggested that radicalisation was not necessarily a straightforward linear process. Personal trajectories or pathways were increasingly depicted as murky processes with ins and outs, just as in criminal gangs, neither fixed nor pre-determined but highly ‘individualised and non-linear, with a number of common ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors but no single determining feature’ (Emmerson, 2016; see also Horgan, 2014). Explicitly rejecting models based upon an orderly sequence of steps that produce an output, the American scholars Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins put forward an alternative metaphor of a ‘puzzle’, consisting of four pieces or factors that come together to produce violent radicalisation: personal and collective grievances; networks and interpersonal ties; political and religious ideologies; and enabling environments and support structures (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

Most leading scholars and practitioners in the field today view radicalisation broadly in the same way scholars in the 1980s viewed terrorism: as a complex interaction between personal characteristics, group dynamics, belief systems, and contextual factors. But beyond this broad but real consensus on the key variables that play a crucial role in radicalisation leading to terrorist violence, substantial conceptual disagreements exist, sometimes leading to febrile scholarly debates.

Questioning radicalisation

When advancing the concept of radicalisation in 2004–5, European officials readily acknowledged that the notion of 'radicalisation' was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon. The main reason for going along with this concept was that it allowed us to speak about 'root causes' in politically less contentious terms. 'Root causes' was indeed rapidly becoming a controversial idiom. After 9/11 (and until a reassessment of counterterrorism policies by the Obama administration in 2011), the United States in particular considered that speaking of 'root causes' implied condoning certain terrorist acts. 'Roots was a taboo in the Bush administration, . . . with "evil" the only acceptable explanation for the attacks of Sept. 11' (Gellman, 2002). Within the EU too, some officials were reluctant to use the words 'root causes'. Not only did they notice that within the United Nations, this was indeed used to condone cases of political violence. They also feared that it could be hijacked by radicals in the Basque region or Northern Ireland to justify their terrorist tactics. They therefore chose to rather speak about 'conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism' and about 'radicalisation'. The latter was gradually embraced as a pithy shorthand for the former and, in particular, as a less politically charged word to discuss 'root causes' of terrorism.

But 'radicalisation' was a source of ambiguity and confusion from the start, not unlike the word 'terrorism' itself in the 1970s and 1980s, when a lot of scholarly energy was spent on how to define 'terrorism'. While the scope of radicalisation studies rapidly expanded, involving a widening array of academic disciplines and a new generation of terrorism scholars, warnings about the ill-defined, ambiguous, and controversial nature of the very notion of radicalisation also persisted.

In 2006, the Commission's own Expert Group had already cautioned against the ambiguity of the concept. It soon became apparent that academic definitions of radicalisation indeed varied as much as official ones and that not all were up to academic standards (Schmid, 2013a). Because of its intrinsic ambiguities, no obvious metrics are available that objectively gauge radicalisation, notwithstanding numerous endeavours in academia, police, and policy circles.

A number of scholars, including the Irish-born foremost expert on the psychology of terrorism, John Horgan, also highlighted early on the politicised nature of the term (Schmid, 2013a, 17). According to some, 'radicalisation' was instrumentalised from the start. Reflecting on the UK's counter-radicalisation programme, called 'Prevent', launched by the Blair government in the wake of the July 2005 bombings, Arun Kundnani, former editor of *Race and Class*, equated it with 'mass surveillance of Muslim populations' (Kundnani, 2012, p. 19; see also Thomas, 2010; Lambert, 2011). Some scholars, including John Horgan and Marc Sageman, even suggested skipping the concept of radicalisation altogether (Schmid, 2013b). Most scholars do not go that far. Calling radicalisation 'one of the great buzzwords of our time' (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013), terrorism scholar Peter Neumann nevertheless maintains that something called radicalisation does exist, but that 'its meaning is ambiguous, and all the major controversies and debates that have sprung from it are linked to the same inherent ambiguity' (Neumann, 2013).

The scholarly debates indeed reveal several interrelated conceptual fault lines, not unlike the competing paradigms that were at play in the early debates among EU officials, and for the same reasons: the absence of a consensus definition of radicalisation and diverging hypotheses about the nature of its drivers.

Debating radicalisation

The emergence of the radicalisation paradigm has led to a tremendous increase in terrorism-related research. Scholarly energy devoted to the issue far exceeds that of the earlier heyday of terrorism

studies in the 1970s and 1980s. But opinions are divided on the result of these efforts. Some scholars are sceptical that much progress has been made at all and argue that terrorism research has basically stagnated (Sageman, 2014). Others dispute this assessment as overly pessimistic and are more positive 'because we feel we have ourselves learned a number of things about terrorism since 9/11' (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014).

But even those who claim that real progress has been made in understanding how individuals get involved in terrorism readily acknowledge that gaps continue to exist and that a number of issues remain subject to debate and sometimes even frenzy among academics. Several major conceptual 'fault-lines' (Neumann, 2013, p. 873) can be identified.

Context versus ideology as the main driver of radicalisation is the first major fault line in radicalisation studies. Many standard definitions of radicalisation, official as well as academic, define it as a process of gradually embracing radical and extremist ideas that act as a conveyor belt and predictor of terrorist violence. As a corollary, research has often emphasised the micro level of the individual to the detriment of the macro level of contextual factors (Sedgwick, 2010, pp. 480–481). In a sense, this de-contextualisation has been a step backwards compared to the broad consensus among the leading terrorism scholars of the 1980s that individual involvement in terrorism never happens in a vacuum. While many scholars of radicalisation do acknowledge that contextual factors are important, the sheer magnitude of the potential causes that have been proposed and their intrinsic political nature have prevented a consensus on this issue. Some scholars have pointed to 'robust findings that group-based feelings of injustice reliably predict collective action' (King & Taylor, 2011, p. 610) and suggested applying these findings from research on collective action to the study of terrorism. Still other scholars point at macro-structures, such as globalisation or resistance to modernisation, failed states, or the absence of freedom and the rule of law. Some link the emergence of radicalisation and terrorism to Western colonialism (Burgat, 2019), population growth, and the existence of a youth bulge (Urdal, 2006).

Other scholars, however, dispute such sweeping assessments and insist that they cannot account for the limited number of individuals involved in acts of terrorism. The same question was already raised in the 1980s (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 389). Fraught with methodological difficulties and confronted with a seemingly endless amount of contextual conditions and factors to be taken into consideration, scholars at the time pointed out that the 'root cause' approach was promising on a theoretical level but questioned its feasibility on a practical level (Van de Voorde, 2011, p. 49; Wilkinson, 1974, p. 126). Many therefore preferred to approach terrorism in more pragmatic ways and opted for empirical, policy-oriented studies or crisis management analyses, resulting in direct and more useful, applied knowledge (Jenkins, 1999, pp. viii, xi; Jenkins, 2001). This observation remains valid today. It helps to understand why the study of individual pathways and trajectories has become prevalent in radicalisation studies. This offered a seemingly more practical and promising approach to understanding involvement in terrorism, as EU officials too had concluded (Bjørge, 2005, pp. 5–6).

Most scholars subscribe to the idea that radicalisation is the result of many variables. But weighing the relative importance of these variables represents the second fault line in scholarly debates. Two variables vie for pre-eminence as the main driver of radicalisation, and both have received a lot of academic attention: the role of ideology and the influence of kinship and friendship bonds.

Few scholars will dispute that ideology is an important variable. It can cover ideas, belief systems, a fixed set of axioms, and narratives (hence, some ambiguity also exists as to what exactly is meant by ideology). But exactly how important these are is a matter of debate. To some, it

represents the key driver of radicalisation (Kepel, 2015; Dawson, 2018, p. 99), while others argue that it serves a variety of different purposes, depending very much on the individuals involved:

Ideology is relevant, though poorly understood. Some individuals embrace an ideology before joining the group while others adopt ideology afterwards. Some espouse the group's ideology when preparing for an actual attack or because they need to justify their actions to themselves or to others after the fact. Others seek out an ideology they've decided they want *to do something*. For those who become involved in violent extremist groups, . . . , acquiring the ideology, the language, and the mindset happens further along the path – they are just some of the acquired qualities of engagement as opposed to prerequisites for initial involvement in the first place.

(Horgan, 2019, p. 3)

There also exists a strong body of scholarship – reaching back to research on involvement in neo-Nazi groups in the 1990s (Bjørge, 2002) – that suggests mobilisation via pre-existing social bonds is a much better gauge to understand how individuals get involved in terrorist acts than ideology (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Roy, 2015, p. 8). It earned its credentials through the earlier social movement theories (Malthaner, 2017), but it was definitely introduced in the field of radicalisation studies by Marc Sageman (2004, 2008b).

These academic discussions on the respective importance of ideology and social bonds are part of a broader – an older – debate on the exact nature of the relationship between idea and action and, as a corollary, on the observation that many carry radical ideas but few act on them. In radicalisation studies, the former is labelled 'cognitive radicalisation' while the latter goes by the concept of 'behavioral radicalisation'. While many official de-radicalisation strategies still use some form of conveyor belt model whereby ideas lead to action, most scholars will reject this crude metaphor and distinguish between developing extremist ideas and engaging in terrorism (Borum, 2011, p. 30; McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2017).

A third conceptual fault line in radicalisation studies is closely related to both previous ones. Is Islam a key factor in radicalisation or – more broadly – is involvement in religious terrorism inherently different from involvement in non-religious, political terrorism?

Before 9/11, terrorism in the name of a religion was largely absent from terrorism research. In one of the few studies on the subject, RAND scholar Bruce Hoffman explicitly stated that religious terrorism was driven by value systems and worldviews that were radically different from those of secular terrorists. As a result, violence was more unrestrained and indiscriminate (Hoffman, 1993, 1998, pp. 94–95). Following 9/11 and at least until the 2010s, when new forms of violence-prone extremism started to emerge, terrorism and radicalisation research had a strong Islam bias. To some, this implied that only scholars with a solid knowledge of Islam could authoritatively address this form of terrorism (Kaplan, 2016, p. 9).

The least one can say is that most western scholars had to adapt (and still do) to unfamiliar concepts, more or less related to Islam. This has reinforced the already ambiguous and contentious nature of the concept of radicalisation:

When applied to Islam and Muslims, the term radical is often being used interchangeably and opaquely with terms such as fundamentalist, Islamist, Jihadist and neo-Salafist or Wahabbist with little regard for what these terms actually mean, and instead indicate signals about political Islam that these members of the media and politicians wish to transmit.

(Githens-Mazer, 2010, p. 8)

The conceptual debates on the role of Islam in radicalisation coincide with the ‘old’ versus ‘new’ terrorism debate. At one end of the spectrum, there are scholars who subscribe to Hoffman’s claim that religion and thus jihadi terrorism represent a significant difference compared to politically motivated terrorism (Juergensmeyer, 2000a, 2000b; Simon & Benjamin, 2000; Dawson, 2017). On the other side of the spectrum, scholars dismiss the novelty thesis, pointing out essential continuities with previous expressions of terrorist violence (Duyvesteyn, 2004; Crenshaw, 2011) or arguing that ‘there is no important practical difference between terrorism on behalf of political ideology and that on behalf of religion’ (Fettweis, 2009, p. 277; Stern, 2003; Expert Group, 2008).

When the issue of foreign fighters became a top research concern in 2012–3, the debate between the proponents of both schools sharpened. To some, religion was a key factor in the mobilisation of thousands of volunteers, while others concluded that religion only played a minor role compared to other variables, such as frustration, a lack of perspectives, or the characteristics of the local environment (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Weggemans et al., 2014).

The same fault line is at play in the discussion about whether these volunteers originated from a youth subculture at the fringes of Muslim communities and organisations or, on the contrary, constituted the vanguard of a radicalising *Umma*. According to the latter, the world is facing a ‘global Islamist insurgency’ (Kilcullen, 2005; Lia, 2016), in which non-violent Islamist movements are pursuing the same goals as jihadists, that is, the creation of an Islamic state, and should be countered with the same determination. A less-dramatic portrayal of jihadism positions that rather than an irresistible global uprising, it represents a movement (the French word ‘*mouvance*’ is a more adequate phrasing) that is riven by internal disputes on ideology, tactics, and leadership and very much dependent upon local circumstances that allow it to prosper – or not. In most countries where it manifests itself, it can hardly count on the support of more than a tiny slice of the population (Arab Opinion, 2015, 2020; Molenbeek, 2017).

In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, these divergent scholarly opinions reached a climax in a heated and still ongoing debate between two of the leading French scholars of Islam and jihadism, Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy. The former considers Salafism the cradle of jihadism and jihadi terrorists the result of Islamist-dominated enclaves in France where individuals are groomed to become terrorists. The latter, on the contrary, sees jihadism as a generational revolt, not unlike the Italian Red Brigades or the German RAF of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Roy, the current generation of jihadi terrorists did not go through the Salafist funnel nor did they originate from Salafist enclaves, so no link of causality can be established between Salafism and jihadism. The former thus sees the radicalisation of Islam as the core ingredient, warning of a civil war that threatens France and the West. The latter invokes an Islamisation of radicalism, thus relegating religion to the fringes of jihadi terrorism (Roy, 2016, p. 15).

Looking back on the evolution of radicalisation studies since 2004–5, we see a thriving field of research with an increasing number of scholarly disciplines involved and a widening research agenda. Themes keep adding up: gender, mental health and psychopathology, the Internet and social media, culture, the crime-terror nexus, migration, and discourse analyses. The concept has gone global. With all its ambiguities and caveats, it has been embraced by scholars worldwide, moving beyond the original Western-dominated pool of experts (English, 2016, pp. 145–146; Alava et al., 2017; Jones, 2018; Rink & Sharma, 2018; Timbuktu Institute, 2021; Bencherif et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

Since the late 2010s, scholars have started to address the applicability of the existing knowledge on radicalisation to other forms of radicalisation (RAN, 2016, p. 5). Confronted with the rise of a ‘melting pot’ of potentially violent extremisms (Coolsaet & Renard, 2022), how relevant are the findings of radicalisation studies, construed against the background of jihadi terrorism? This

issue represents both a challenge to the validity of existing knowledge on radicalisation and an opportunity to strengthen its academic moorings.

Countering radicalisation

In 2004–5, EU officials added 'radicalisation' to the toolkit of counterterrorism. Upstream prevention, so it was envisaged, would tackle the factors underlying the (self)recruitment of individuals into terrorism and complement the traditional counterterrorism instruments of law enforcement and intelligence gathering. Counterterrorism would thus become a long-term strategy aimed at obtaining sustainable results, something that could not be achieved by purely reactive and repressive measures. Did the results live up to expectations?

Devising effective preventive policies proved to be more difficult than initially thought. The United Kingdom was among the first European member states to adopt this new dimension in 2003 as part of its overall counterterrorism strategy. But 'Prevent' was the least developed strand of its CT policy (CONTEST, 2009, p. 82). Moreover, from the start, competing counter-radicalisation models clashed. While tackling ideology was privileged as the main objective of Prevent, deep disagreement existed as to whether authorities could partner with Salafis and Islamists to tackle Al-Qaeda influence in the United Kingdom (Lambert, 2011, p. 216). In addition, criticisms of stigmatising and spying on Muslim communities made Prevent a toxic programme from the outset. Instead of fostering community cohesion, Prevent was said to further alienate Muslims from the wider society and from authorities (Kundnani, 2009; Mandaville, 2017, p. 5).

What happened to the UK's Prevent was a paradigmatic example of the difficulty for policymakers worldwide to come up with policies that were commensurate with the complexity of the issue.

The United States long considered radicalisation to be a quintessential European problem, opposing the so-called European marginalisation of their Muslim communities with the successful American integration of Muslims, often living in affluent suburbs rather than poor ethnic enclaves as they did in Europe (Vidino, 2010, p. 2). But in 2009, young Americans of Somali descent living in Minneapolis went on a suicide mission in Somalia. They were soon followed by a group of American Muslims from Virginia who travelled to Pakistan, supposedly to join the Taliban. This came as a shock to the American counterterrorism community and led, in June 2010, to the organisation of the very first EU-US high-level encounter on radicalisation on the premises of the European Commission.

In order to distinguish itself from George Bush's Global War on Terror, the Obama Administration promoted the concepts of 'Violent Extremism' and 'Countering Violent Extremism' (CVE). 'CVE' was launched in August 2011 (White House, 2011) and became a landmark signature of Obama's counterterrorism approach, soon adopted by governments worldwide. It essentially covered the same ground as Europe's counter-radicalisation: 'The shift in aim was to prevention and resilience primarily at home, shaping individual attitudes to resist the ideological and emotional attractions of appeals to violence rather than crushing the actors behind it' (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017, p. 175). Making environments non-permissive for terrorists seeking to exploit them was a long-term challenge that could not be met by even the best intelligence operations and law enforcement efforts, as the American administration now also acknowledges.

In December 2015, the United Nations introduced its own acronym 'PVE', Preventing Violent Extremism, which basically covers the same preventive, non-coercive corollary to counterterrorism as the American CVE and the European counter-radicalisation (U.N., 2015; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2019). By then, the unprecedented mobilisation of foreign fighters for the conflict in Syria had given a new impulse to prevention programmes worldwide (Renard, 2022, p. 24).

In Europe, many countries have set up a wide array of national and local de-radicalisation programmes. These programmes often aim at creating, sometimes uneasy, partnerships between law enforcement, police, social services, and, in some countries, civil society organisations. Best practices are being shared between practitioners, and dedicated networks have been set up, with the EU-sponsored Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) being the best-known example. New risk assessment tools have been developed for use within the police, prisons, and social services that accompany individuals ‘at risk’ of radicalisation.

Reflecting the ambiguity and multifaceted nature of the concept of radicalisation, countering radicalisation in some European countries accordingly resembles a potpourri of objectives and programmes of all kinds, for which it is not easy to assess what works and what doesn’t. In other countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, while not totally excluding contextual factors, ideology is the primary objective in counter-radicalisation strategies (Bonelli & Ragazzi, 2019, p. 121). Still other European countries have not invested significantly in countering radicalisation and violent extremism (see Ragazzi & Walmsey in this volume).

At the height of the ISIS mobilisation, the American CVE programme was an ambitious, expansive ‘whole-of-government’ programme, covering many departments and agencies, and establishing local pilot programmes for community outreach. Homeland Security had to establish an interagency CVE task force to coordinate the multitude of counter-radicalisation initiatives (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017, pp. 29, 136). But confronted with the complexity of the issue and growing political resistance, national agencies whittled down their CVE workload to a bare minimum, and only sporadic local programmes remained in place, concentrating on one-on-one interventions with individuals already on the radar of law enforcement (Clifford & Hughes, 2022).

In the Global South too, numerous de-radicalisation programmes have been set up, such as in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Here, they place a heavy emphasis on the religious dimension since authorities consider radicalisation to be a deviation from righteous religious beliefs. In the case of the Saudi programme, its effectiveness is questioned by many possibly due to its links to the military (LaFree & Freilich, 2019, p. 11). In some countries, civil society organisations have long played a key role in bridge-building efforts at the local level and are pursuing this effort under the new idioms. In still other cases, authorities have adopted the new concepts, but not with the expressed intention of addressing the environment that allows radicalisation to emerge (Renard, 2019; Pinfari, 2020; Trauthig, 2021). Also, some did so with the hope of receiving Washington’s support in their policy of criminalising their opposition (Hawkins, 2015; Emmerson, 2015, p. 4).

Countering radicalisation is still very much a very young area of research and policymaking, and thus work is in the making. Just like the literature on the effectiveness of counterterrorism itself, research on countering radicalisation remains significantly under-theoretised (Renard, 2022, p. 135). By their very nature, all prevention policies are hard to evaluate through evidence-based assessments (see also Busher & Fisher in this volume). The jury is thus still out as to whether counter-radicalisation programmes actually work. As the German scholar Daniel Koehler, editor of the only dedicated academic journal on the subject, *Journal for Deradicalization*, explains, there are different types of intervention programmes with different characteristics and performance expectations (Koehler, 2017). As will become evident in Sections 3 and 4 of this handbook, programmes vary according to who is eligible to participate, who the instructors and other staff are, the curriculum’s content, the tools employed, and the goals and desired outcomes (LaFree & Freilich, 2019, p. 11). As a result, they are hard to compare.

But significant efforts are being undertaken to systematically assess the effectiveness of P/CVE programmes (Colaert, 2017; Pistone et al., 2019; Nickolson et al., 2021; CPN-PREV). Some scholars, however, remain sceptical:

That we do not know precisely what we are preventing, let alone knowing how or whether we might have prevented it, does not make for a bright future.

(Horgan, 2014, p. 10)

In the end, what have we learnt?

The emergence of a new wave of terrorism and the introduction of the concept of radicalisation in the toolkit of counterterrorism policies and research have set in motion an avalanche of public money, many times superior to the amounts available in the earlier terrorism era of the 1970s and 1980s. The irresistible success of the new concept had less to do with its intrinsic value than with the social and political environment in which it was embraced. It made it possible to put a label on the unfamiliar phenomenon of political Islam. Reflecting on the status the concept of radicalisation had gained over the years, Alex Schmid, former Officer-in-Charge of the Vienna-based Terrorism Prevention Branch of the United Nations and a lifelong scholar on terrorism, concluded:

[W]e have to admit that in the final analysis, 'radicalisation' is not just a socio-psychological scientific concept but also a political construct, introduced into the public and academic debate mainly by national security establishments faced with political Islam in general and Salafist Jihadism in particular. The concept was 'pushed' to highlight a relatively narrow, micro-level set of problems related to the causes of terrorism that Western governments faced in their efforts to counter predominantly 'home-grown' terrorism from second and third generation members of Muslim diasporas.

(Schmid, 2013a, p. 19)

The absence of an agreed-upon understanding of what radicalisation turned it into a catch-all concept. The post-9/11 political and social environment ultimately allowed for the new concept of radicalisation to take centre stage in counterterrorism thinking, first in Europe and then worldwide. It got embroiled in the concerns over immigration, integration, and multiculturalism, as well as the unease over Islam and Muslims, that had all been growing steadily since the 1980s, particularly in Europe. Right-wing pundits and movements in particular had been eager to exploit this environment to cultivate divisive identity politics (UNDP, 2004, pp. 1–2, 76). Radicalisation made it possible to speak about these issues in a seemingly sanitised way that differed from the anti-Islam rhetoric of the far right. Embraced by the polity, the media, and academia, it became a self-sustaining concept. New departments and think tanks have been created. New jobs and new career opportunities have been made available. If so much money and effort are being spent on it and so many researchers are working on it, then radicalisation has to be a topic worth scholarly and political attention.

Has this resulted in a corresponding breakthrough in our understanding of terrorism and political violence, going beyond the answers provided by the earlier generation of terrorism scholars?

Most scholars and first-line practitioners acknowledge that radicalisation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that defies easy answers and recipes. This is not unlike the broad consensus

on terrorism among scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, radicalisation and violent extremism are as contentious concepts as terrorism and as easily politicised. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the way radicalisation is perceived has direct relevance for the elaboration of policies intended to counter it.

Today's debates on radicalisation are not so different from yesterday's debates on terrorism: the difficulty of operationalising root causes; the correlation between beliefs and violence; the nature of the threat. One might mention other issues that resurface with every terrorism wave, such as the ever-returning question of mental health. As a result, predicting who will become a terrorist today remains as elusive a goal as it was back then.

With hindsight, the concept of radicalisation has not been a conceptual breakthrough. It has been less helpful at explaining terrorism and, in particular, individual motivations than its European advocates anticipated in 2004, in part because of its over-reliance on micro-level research. Nevertheless, scholarly knowledge on why and how individuals engage in terrorism has undoubtedly improved.

The myriad radicalisation studies produced since 2004 have confirmed that involvement in terrorism in most cases indeed results from socialisation and mobilisation dynamics (Schmid, 2013a), in which interpersonal ties are often more important than ideology (even if heated discussions are ongoing on the exact role ideology plays in this process). Radicalisation is thus habitually tied up with local conditions. Contrary to the earlier mentioned pessimistic assessments in 2014, our understanding of what happens to individuals once they get involved in such a dynamic has undeniably deepened. This can result in terrorism in a way that is quite similar to other forms of socialisation into deviant behaviour, like criminal gangs, religious sects, and youth street gangs.

Moreover, scholars and first-line practitioners have confidently assessed that not all individuals follow the same trajectory into violence. It does not necessarily resemble a logical and staged process of successive steps. There are many individual trajectories involving different sets of factors, dissimilar timelines, and diverse triggers. As a result, countering radicalisation turned out to be trial and error with scant evidence of the effectiveness of specific interventions and policies – beyond the acknowledgement that a single one-size-fits-all programme to stem an individual's slide into extremism and violence will not work. National characteristics, local conditions, and personal trajectories are simply too diverse.

A final word on the issue of contextual and structural drivers – the weak spot in both terrorism and radicalisation studies. It will always remain a complex issue to relate individual motivations and behaviour to context. But this shouldn't discourage scholars from investing in the exploration of why and when an environment becomes conducive to radicalisation. Terrorism is never an automatic reaction to conditions (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 389). Neither is radicalisation. The accumulated knowledge on terrorism and radicalisation over the decades gives credence to the assessment that the decision to perpetrate a terrorist attack or to join a terrorist group is as much an individual decision as the compound effect of a conducive environment, group dynamics in which personal trajectories run their course, and a mobilising narrative. But for terrorism to emerge and take hold, one additional dimension is required, something more intangible: the feeling that an historical moment has arrived (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 388; Coolsaet & Renard, 2022). When terrorists and terrorist organisations are able to proclaim that history is on their side and that their tactics present a unique opportunity to radically change existing conditions, then terrorism becomes a credible and enticing offer for action.

The interplay of all these dimensions will always be hard to quantify or mould into a model. But all of them have nevertheless to be present for terrorism to emerge, and for explaining why and how individuals become terrorists.

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