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## **STUDYING VIOLENT RADICALIZATION IN EUROPE II**

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL  
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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# I. Introduction

Why do some apparently well-integrated youth in Europe become attracted to Islamist militancy? Why and when do people cross from violent talk to violent action? What prevents others, exposed to the same political, ideological, and socioeconomic influences, from crossing? When and how might people de-radicalize and draw back from violent action? What policy initiatives would be called for to limit the spread of radical ideas, counter the factors that spur violent radicalization, and strengthen those, which pull in the other direction? In sum: When, why, and how do people living in a democracy become radicalized to the point of being willing to use or directly support the use of terrorist violence against civilians, and what can be done about it?

These questions have been at the center of both academic and public debate over the past years. Yet, there is still a scarcity of empirically based knowledge and no consensus with regard to which theories and approaches to apply to the study of violent radicalization and mobilization.

This working paper explores the potential contribution of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to throw light on the question of why and how violent radicalization occurs in Europe.

The paper first provides an overview of the main schools and major scholars working with socio-psychological and psychological approaches within the field of terrorism studies. It discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches and identifies the most promising avenues for further research: Group process approaches and Identity Theory. Finally, the paper elaborates on the specific issues and questions highlighted by group process approaches and Identity Theory respectively.

## 2. Major Schools and Scholars<sup>1</sup>

The subfield of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to terrorism studies is, like the overall field of terrorism research, characterized by a variety of competing approaches with different explanations of what causes terrorism and violent radicalization. For the sake of overview this paper groups them into sociological approaches, individual level approaches, and group process approaches.

Sociological theories focus on overall structural factors impacting large groups, group process approaches focus on mechanisms at play in smaller groups, and psychoanalytically inspired and cognitive theories focus on factors at the level of the individual personality. Sociological and psychoanalytical approaches focus on relatively stable factors – be they structural conditions or individual dispositions – hypothesized to cause radicalization and terrorism. Group process approaches, in contrast, take a dynamic view and focus on processes and stages through which violent dispositions emerge. Some approaches rely on a psychology of needs (what psychological or group psychological traits make individuals or groups prone to violence?); whereas others instead rely on a psychology of rewards (what do radical groups offer the individual?) [Borum, 2004:3; Crenshaw, 1986:13; Crenshaw, 2000:4; Horgan, 2003:7; Merari, 1985:186; Victoroff, 2005:2].

<sup>1</sup> We have based our choice of which scholars to include in this review on a combination of criteria looking at the relevance, scientific quality, and originality of their work. We have emphasized theoretical and methodological coherence and clarity, looking in particular for studies and scholars, able to integrate more different levels of analysis and/or bringing a new and original angle to the study of radicalization. Given the scarcity of good primary data-based studies of terrorist motivations, we have favored studies based on primary data, like participant observation or interviews. We have done this with a view to gleaning insights about radicalization, but also practical and methodological insights with regard to the generation of primary data. When selecting studies and scholars we have supplemented our own reading of the field with a screening of all issues of the two major peer-reviewed journals within terrorism studies “Terrorism and Political Violence” and “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism” from 2001 to 2007 to make sure that we had not missed important contributors and/or studies in our own review of the field.

## SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Sociological theories focus on how external factors, such as social, economic, political, or cultural conditions impact on individual and group behavior and, in some instances, lead to violence.

The hypothesis of relative deprivation probably belongs to the most well-known sociological attempts at explaining collective political mobilization and violence. The hypothesis posits that collective mobilization, terrorism, or civil war emerge when people feel deprived of economic, social or cultural benefits to which they feel entitled. People might experience relative deprivation either by comparing their position to the position of other groups in society, or due to a temporal development in which a period with an expansion of rights and privileges is followed by a period of stagnation [Gurr, 1970:42].

In a related argument, the so-called Frustration-Aggression hypothesis, which emerged out of an interdisciplinary study of the roots of violence in early twentieth century Europe, has suggested that violence is a response to oppression. Finding his or her ambitions blocked, an individual might, according to the Frustration-Aggression hypothesis, react by either flight (repression) or fight (violence) [Horgan, 2003:12]. Along similar lines it has been pointed out that terrorism results from humiliation and a consequent urge for revenge on those perceived as responsible for the humiliation [Khosrokhavar, 2006: 49].

These hypotheses have been criticized on the grounds that whereas millions of people live under frustrating conditions, only a fragment turns to terrorism. Moreover, it has been pointed out, many terrorists do not belong to the oppressed or deprived classes [Borum, 2004:12].

Neither relative deprivation, frustration-aggression or humiliation-revenge mechanisms in their crude forms appear applicable when it comes to explaining current day terrorism in democratic and affluent European societies. A modified version, however, emphasizing *perceived* blockage of ambitions or *perceived* humiliation might well apply. Moreover, just as affluent middle-class European terrorist of the 1970s claimed to fight on behalf of the presumable oppressed third world, so, Islamist militants in Europe have claimed to fight on behalf of what they claim to be occupied and oppressed Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. The perceived humiliation of all Muslims due to the plight of Muslims in conflict zones around the world – “imagined humiliation” or “humiliation by proxy” – has been suggested as an explanatory factor driving radicalization in Europe.

Another approach, pointing to background factors presumably affecting a large group of people is the so-called Social Learning Theory. According to Social Learning Theory, aggression is neither a more or less automatic response to intolerable political or socioeconomic conditions nor an innate drive as some psychological theories would have it. Instead it is a behavior, which follows observation and imitation of an aggressive model. Terrorism might thus be explained by the directly or vicariously experienced glorification of violence [Hassan, 2001: 22]. The values of certain subcultures reinforce the imitated and learned behavior, which over time becomes a relatively permanent personality trait [Ferracuti, 1963:16]. People growing up in hotbeds might be particularly exposed. However, the wide distribution of terrorist propaganda via the internet could cause violence as a result of social learning far from actual conflict areas, for example in Europe, even if the reinforcing and supportive subculture is likely to be weaker and the phenomenon of violence thus less common.

In line with the relative deprivation, frustration-aggression, and humiliation/revenge hypotheses, Social Learning Theory has been criticized for a lack of specificity: Social learning and imitation of an aggressive model, it has been pointed out, might help animate the minority, which turns to violence, but the theory does not account for why only a minority exposed to the same aggressive model eventually “learns” aggression [Victoroff, 2005:18].

In sum, sociological theories highlight the potential impact of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural context of radicalization. But arguably, they cannot stand alone as eventually only a fragment of the individuals exposed to the same factors turn to violence. One attempt at accounting for this is to focus instead on psychological and personality traits as the propellants of radicalization, as do the individual level theories discussed next.

## **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

A number of approaches focusing on explanatory factors at the individual level (thoughts, attitudes, traits inside the individual) have been suggested for studying terrorism. They comprise psychodynamic approaches, Identity Theory, and cognitive approaches.

Inspired by Freudian psychology, psychodynamic approaches to the study of terrorism share the basic assumption that early childhood developments shape mental life, and that much of mental life is unconscious. Psychological development, according to this perspective, proceeds in stages based on infantile sexual fantasies. Unresolved intra-psychic tension in connection with these fantasies presumably leads to psychological distress. The psychological mechanism

for dealing with such distress (unpleasant or socially unacceptable thoughts) is either repression or projection of the unpleasant or unacceptable thoughts and emotions unto an external object.

One example of a psychodynamic explanation of terrorism is the so-called narcissistic rage hypothesis. Narcissism Theory proposes that infants experiencing parental neglect are prevented from developing normal healthy self-images, adult identity, and morality. As a coping mechanism such individuals might either develop narcissistic grandiose fantasies, exalting the self, or submerge him or herself into a group and thus let a strong group identity replace the damaged self-identity. In either case a strong desire for destroying the source of the original injury is hypothesized to exist. Terrorist violence results, according to the hypothesis of narcissistic rage, when this anger is projected outwards unto individuals, groups or institutions in the surrounding society.

Paranoia Theory, in a similar vein, focuses on how individuals presumably deal with intolerable or socially unacceptable feelings through projection. Problematic feelings are not accepted as part of the self, but instead ascribed to something external. Socially acceptable feelings are located within an idealized “good self,” while bad feelings are split out and projected unto something external. Individuals with such traits are hypothesized to be likely to strongly idealize the group to which they belong – the in-group – while demonizing outsiders. Paranoia about the survival of the in-group creates the psychological foundation permitting terrorists to kill random civilians who, seen from the outside, do not directly threaten the terrorist group.

Absolutists and Apocalyptic Theory inspired explanations of terrorism points to similar mechanisms. Terrorists are frequently uncompromising moralists, it is claimed, and such a world view is explainable in terms of the psychological mechanisms of splitting and projection. The absolutist and uncompromising world view of a number of terrorist groups appeal to young adults with weak identities. Conspiracy theories about in-group annihilation combined with a demonization of the out-group, it is hypothesized, provide the psychological backdrop for legitimizing the use of violence in “self-defense.”

Studies in experimental psychology have confirmed the Freudian notion that the motives behind individual behavior are frequently unconscious. At a minimum, the psychodynamic models thus should alert researchers to the fact that the terrorists’ own (and possibly sincere) explanation of his or her motives do not necessarily represent the whole or even the most important part of the truth [Lanning, 2002:28; Post, 2003:5; Post, 1998:8]. Yet, none of the



psychodynamic theories of terrorism have been systematically tested and validated [Lanning, 2002:28]. The interview based studies, which have been carried out, have suffered from various shortcomings such as small and non-random samples, lack of cooperation from the terrorists, and lack of control groups to determine whether the psychological traits hypothesized to cause terrorism are actually more frequent in the sample than in the general population.<sup>2</sup>

A basic flaw in the psychodynamic theories, critics have pointed out, is that the underlying assumptions about the impact of early childhood development are not open to empirical testing, but instead are treated as a priori assumptions. Instead of assuming such an impact, it is argued, a more empirical approach testing the connection between various personality traits and specific behaviors would be required [Horgan, 2003:13, 16; Victoroff, 2005:26].

Erik Erikson's Identity Theory, while rooted in psychodynamic theory adheres less strictly to Freudian notions. Identity Theory focuses on the position and dispositions of young adults and on how identity development proceeds in stages. Erikson suggests that young people reach a stage where ideologies assist in identity formation. If a young adult lacks self-esteem, for example due to excessively controlling parents, joining a terrorist group might function as a strong "identity stabilizer," providing the young adult with a sense of belonging, worth, and purpose. In cases where the young adult feels excluded from a surrounding majority culture, as might be the case with regard violent Islamist radicalization in Europe, the perceived need for a violent "defense" of the group and the ideology might develop.

Other scholars in a similar vein have suggested that individuals with a need for identity consolidation who belong to minority groups could be attracted to terrorism as a radical reaffirmation of ethnic or religious roots and traditions [Horgan, 2003:15].

Given the fact that the persons involved with Islamist militancy in Europe without exception have been drawn from religious and/or ethnic minorities and increasingly seem to become involved already in their teens, Identity Theory might offer interesting concepts for further

<sup>2</sup> The major study to date was commissioned by the German Ministry of the Interior and comprised interviews with more than 200 suspected (not convicted) incarcerated West German terrorists. The interviews indicated a high frequency of certain personality traits such as narcissism or neurotic hostility, yet the researchers differed in their interpretations. Baeyer-Katte et al. (1982); Jäger, Schmidtchen, and Süllwoll (1981) Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

exploration. One of the most recent and from a societal point of view worrisome trends is the involvement of very young, apparently well-integrated Muslims, radicalizing in small, tightly knit groups of peers, as was for example the case with the group behind the attacks on the London underground in July 2005. It has been suggested that forming or joining an Islamist militant group could be seen as a rebellion against both the parent generation's more traditionalist culture, and the surrounding Western majority culture by youth not feeling at home with/fully accepted by neither. A terrorist group could thus, according to Identity Theory, provide both a vehicle for rebellion, self-assertion, and identity definition [Crenshaw, 1986:13].

Cognitive Theory offers an alternative and, arguably, more "scientific" approach to the study of individual level factors than psychodynamic theories. Cognitive functions refer to mental functions such as memory, attention, ability to anticipate and learn rules, bias, ability to handle complexity etc. More studies have established a connection between cognitive capacity and violence and it has been hypothesized that there might also be a connection between cognitive style and an individuals disposition to join a terrorist group. However, to date very few empirical studies have explored the connection between cognitive style and terrorism [Victoroff, 2005:27]. Arguably, the scarcity of data exploring this connection might be due to difficulty with obtaining the cooperation of active or incarcerated terrorists as well as the cooperation of the authorities to administer validated psychological tests in a structured way. Moreover, random sampling is obviously difficult considering the small size of the population and thus, even if the application of validated instruments might lead to a high level of validity, the generalizability of results would be dubious.

The limited extent of empirical testing of the various theories makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions with regard to the role of psychological factors and mechanisms behind violent radicalization and terrorism. Yet, most scholars working within the field tend to agree that the data, which do exist, strongly suggests that terrorism can not be explained as a result of psychopathology. Even if certain psychodynamic forces might be at play, the individuals in question would be well outside the psychiatrically imbalanced or neurotic range [Horgan, 2003:7; Borum, 2004:3; Crenshaw, 1986:13; Crenshaw, 2000:4; Sprinzak, 1998:11].

It has been debated whether terrorists might still exhibit common and identifiable personality traits. Based on a review of scholarly articles within the field published from 1887-2003, Victoroff suggests that terrorists probably exhibit high affective valence on an ideological issue combined with a personal stake – strongly felt humiliation, need for identity and glory or a drive for revenge. In addition, he suggests, terrorists are likely to exhibit low cognitive

flexibility such as a low tolerance of ambiguity, an elevated tendency to attribution error etc. as well as an ability to suppress moral constraints due to intrinsic or acquired factors [Victoroff, 2005:35].

Most scholars, however, point out that the variety of different types of terrorism and the variety of roles within terrorist groups makes it unlikely that there should be such a thing as one terrorist psychological profile or one set of factors accounting for radicalization. Leaders are likely to differ from followers and the supporters/perpetrators of nationalist terrorism are likely to differ from the supporters/perpetrators of ethnic or religiously inspired terrorism. Moreover, it is pointed out, the factors leading an individual to join a terrorist group might differ from factors making an individual stay in such a group.

To sum up, the great strength of explanations focusing on the individual level is that, unlike cultural or broader social and economical theories, they purport to explain why *only a minority* of individuals exposed to similar conditions turn to terrorism. Amongst the shortcomings, however, are the allegedly non-testable underlying assumptions of psychodynamic theories as well as the general difficulties in applying and testing the various individual level explanations for terrorism.

## GROUP PROCESSES

An alternative approach, which like individual level theories purports to provide an answer to why only a minority of those exposed to the same overall political, cultural and socioeconomic influences turn to terrorism, are approaches looking at group processes and group dynamics. In contrast to psychodynamic or cognitive approaches these approaches do not focus on innate individual characteristics, but instead on how certain social processes can lead “normal” people to do extraordinary things – the key to radicalization, they posit, is to be found in mechanisms such as socialization, bonding, and peer pressure within small groups nested within a wider violent subcultures. These mechanisms supposedly gradually permit the members to overcome normal inhibitions against harming other human beings. Group processes have been emphasized by scholars looking at leftist terrorism in Western democracies, but also in a few studies of Islamist terrorism in Europe [Ferracuti, 1963:16; Ferracuti, 1982:18; Wiktorowicz, no publication year: 33; Wiktorowicz, 2005; Sprinzak, 1998:11].

As opposed to for example psychoanalytical or cognitive theories, group process theories frequently rely on what Walter Reich has termed “a psychology of rewards” rather than a

psychology of needs [Reich, 1998:271]. An ideologically inspired group offers the individual a personal role, a clear worldview, and a righteous purpose. Particularly young people, it has been argued, experience a strong need for identity and belonging – needs which membership in a tightly knit group can fill [Levine, 1999:17]. Once inside the group, processes such as ideological indoctrination, repetitive behavior, and peer pressure creates a proclivity for violence. As a common group identity gradually displaces the individual identity, it also displaces individual moral responsibility and thus contributes towards removing normal constraints on behavior. Isolation might further strengthen in-group bonding as well as permit a demonization of the target of the group's violence.

Different authors have sought to outline different “stages” on the path towards terrorism. Such stages might comprise:

1. Identifying a problem as not just a misfortune, but an injustice.
2. Constructing a moral justification for violence (religious, ideological, political).
3. Blaming the victims (“it is their own fault”).
4. Dehumanizing the victims through language and symbols.
5. Displacing responsibility (God or other authorities ordered the individual to commit the act of violence) or diffusing responsibility (the group, not the individual is responsible).
6. Misconstruing or minimizing the harmful effects (by using euphemisms or by contrasting to other acts which are worse).

The process does not entail an alteration of the personality structure or of moral standards. Instead, the readiness to kill comes about through a cognitive restructuring of the value of killing, these scholars point out [Bandura, 1998:182-186; Bandura, 1975:14; Kelman, 1973:20; Sprinzak, 1998:11; Taylor, 2006:36; Borum, 2004:3; Sprinzak, 1998:11].

It is still debated within the research field whether group dynamics alone can turn a “normal” person into a terrorist or whether it would be necessary to study the interaction between group processes and individual predispositions. To date, no systematic studies with the use of control groups have tested pre- and post-group membership willingness to support or carry out violence against civilians [Victoroff, 2005:30]. If indeed group processes rather than pre-existing individual dispositions explain terrorist violence, an element of contingency would be at play, when it comes to which individuals get involved with terrorism. Chance encounters, as has been argued by for example Marc Sageman, might play a decisive role in violent

radicalization. Becoming a terrorist might be a question of being at the wrong place and meeting the wrong people at the wrong time.

Psychology obviously cannot predict the occurrence of such encounters. Nevertheless, acknowledging the potential for chance encounters to strongly influence life paths, psychologist Albert Bandura has attempted to outline the social and personal factors, which might decide the potential for chance encounters (for example between an individual and a terrorist ideologue/recruiter) to have a strong and lasting effect. Personal factors such as competencies and interests impact on what circles people move in. The development of emotional ties determines the intensity of the impact of a chance encounter. Existing values and standards impact on susceptibility (resonance) – chance encounters might have particularly strong influence, Bandura suggests, when the individual goes through a period of confusion with regard to his or her cultural and religious values.

The suggestion seems plausible when looking at Islamist militancy in Europe, which has hitherto recruited amongst second or third generation immigrants as well as recent converts to Islam – the latter might lack the cultural and religious confidence of long time practitioners of the faith.

Not just personal, but also social factors are likely to influence the strength of the impact of a chance encounter, according to Bandura. Is the new group environment experienced as rewarding and is the new group's symbolic universe compelling? The more closed the group, moreover, the higher the likelihood of a strong impact on the life path of the newcomer [Bandura, 1982:15].

Table 1 and 2 below provide an overview and comparison of the major scholars and schools within the field of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to the study of terrorism. Table 1 summarizes the focus, approach, sources, strengths and weaknesses of various authors' contributions to the field. It also contains an attempt, in cases where the author does not directly address the question of why violent radicalization occurs, to extract from his or her writings what explanatory mechanism he or she would point to. Table 2 provides an overview over respectively sociological, individual level, and group process approaches, pointing out level of analysis, proposed background factors or mechanisms behind violent radicalization, key scholars, and caveats when looking at violent Islamist radicalization in Europe.

**Table 1: Major contributors to the field of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to studying terrorism.**

Scholar	Major focus	Approach	Sources	Factors and mechanisms leading to violent radicalization	Caveat w. regard to radicalization.
Martha Crenshaw	Psychology of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Organization of terrorism. Research on terrorism.	Integrative.	Literature review and analysis.	Interaction of structural, group-level, and individual factors.	Heuristic framework, not empirically derived.
Franco Ferracuti	Subcultures of violence. Italian Brigade Rosse.	Social learning theory.	Interviews (Brigate Rosse). Literature review.	Social learning. Certain subcultures facilitate and reinforce.	Conclusions might not hold for Islamist militancy in Europe.
John Horgan	Ideology. Radicalization.	Social learning theory. Contingency rules (if-then) and rule-following behavior.	Literature review and analysis. Interviews (IRA and others)	Rule following behavior translates ideology into action. Social reinforcers: Friendship/peer pressure/group processes.	Heuristic framework. Not empirically derived.
Ariel Merari	Humiliation. Culture of martyrdom. Group bonding. Palestinian suicide terrorism.	Integrative. Socialization and group dynamics.	Interviews (in ME*).	Signing up: Political factors (humiliation) more important than religion. Once in: Group pressure, indoctrination, martyrdom culture.	Small sample. No control group. Conclusions might not hold for Islamist militancy in Europe.
Jerrold Post	Terrorist personality/profiles.	Individual psychology. Group psychology. Supportive subculture.	Interviews (35 in ME). Literature review and analysis.	Signing up: Psychological needs, splitting, search for identity, belonging. Once in: Group processes, group think, creation of external enemy.	Small sample. No control group. Conclusions might not hold for Islamist militancy in Europe.

Scholar	Major focus	Approach	Sources	Factors and mechanisms leading to violent radicalization	Caveat w. regard to radicalization.
Andrew Silke	Marginalization. Vengeance. Culture of violence. Research on terrorism.	Integrative.	Literature review and analysis.	Interaction of structural, group-level, and individual factors. Process creates terrorist.	Heuristic framework. Not empirically derived.
Ehud Sprinzak	Suicide terrorism. Stages. <sup>3</sup> Middle East. Leftist terrorism in Europe and the US.	Group processes. Group culture and identity.	Interviews (35 in ME). Study of group communication and propaganda.	Group processes, not individual psychology, accounts for terrorism.	Small sample. No control group. Conclusions might not hold Islamist militancy in Europe.
Marc Sageman	Global jihad. Profiles. Networks.	Network analysis.	Court transcripts. Media reports. Biographies. Literature analysis.	Alienated individuals. Group bonding. Chance encounters w recruiters. Group processes, not individual psychology, accounts for terrorism.	Small sample. No control group. Limited biographical material.

\* Middle East.

<sup>3</sup> Path towards terrorism, according to Sprinzak, involves the following stages in group identity 1. Crisis of confidence in government. 2. Conflict of legitimacy (not just criticism of government but of system as such). The group increasingly closes ranks. 3. Crisis of legitimacy. Rhetoric hardens, enemy images are created, representatives of establishment are dehumanized, and process of moral disengagement paves way for violence.

**Table 2: Major schools within the field of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to the study of terrorism.**

	<b>Unit of analysis</b>	<b>Background factors/Explanatory mechanism</b>	<b>Key scholars</b>	<b>Caveat</b>
Sociological Theory	Larger groups. Context, group, individual interaction.	External stressors. Socioeconomic, political, cultural context impact behavior through: Social learning. Rule following.	Gurr. Ferracuti. Horgan.	Why does only a fragment exposed to same stressors turn to terrorism?
Psychodynamic Approaches	Individual.	Intra-psychic tension. Psychological needs.	Post. Erikson.	Not empirically validated. Practically difficult to apply.
Cognitive Theory	Individual.	Cognitive capacity and flexibility.	Post.	Not empirically validated. Practically difficult to apply.
Group process approaches	Smaller groups. Group-individual interaction. Stages.	Group processes. Psychological rewards. Chance encounters.	Bandura. Levine. Horgan. Sageman. Sprinzak.	Not empirically derived.

As summed up in the table, some approaches focus on the individual, some on the group, and some on processes or stages as the key unit or level of analysis. Some combine two or more levels. The approaches also point to different explanatory mechanisms with regard to the overall research question: “When, why, and how do people living in a democracy become radicalized to the point of being willing to use or directly support the use of violence against civilians in Europe?” Some point to external “stressors” in the political, socioeconomic, and cultural context, some emphasize innate psychological tensions or traits, and others emphasize group processes and/or chance encounters with recruiters or other charismatic persons drawing an individual into a radical group.



### 3. Group Process Approaches – A Promising Avenue for Further Research?

How do we explain the phenomenon of Islamist militancy and violent radicalization in Europe?

The group process approach is not empirically derived. Yet, on a number of accounts, it represents a promising approach. First, one of the few empirical studies of radicalization conducted in Europe, a case study of individuals coming into contact with the radical UK movement Al-Muhajeroun, seem to confirm its key tenets [Wiktorowicz, no publication year:33]. Moreover, since the group process model emphasizes the process rather than inherent characteristics or socioeconomic background factors, the model can accommodate the empirical fact that the individuals, which have been involved with Islamist militancy in Europe represent a great variety of socioeconomic profiles and different life paths prior to their radicalization. Finally, if including the role of contingency, as suggested by Bandura, the group process approach could also account for the current puzzle as to why a small fragment of apparently well-integrated citizens of democratic European states turn to terrorism.

A study guided by the group process approach would focus on the following issues and questions:

- The pre and post group-membership development of an individual's thinking and worldview with a focus on issues such as the perception of a situation or an issue as "not right" and "not just," blaming, demonizing, and legitimizing violence.
- The creation and development of the group's symbolic universe and of a world view permitting the killing of civilians. The language of the group members with regard to the potential victims of terrorist acts as well as their language with regard to the authorities would be of interest.
- The relationship between the group culture, the culture of the parents, and the surrounding majority culture and the extent to which group-membership might be attractive as a vehicle of rebellion and self-assertion.
- What the group offers the individual in terms of a sense of belonging, purpose, pride, and worth.
- The nature of and impact of social re-enforcers such as bonding and/or peer pressure within the group.

- The occurrence and role of chance encounters with charismatic ideologues or ideas with regard to individual radicalization and the formation of groups.

Key to exploring the impact of group processes would be to seek to establish the development in group-member attitudes and belief systems over time. Alternatively, or as a supplement, one might seek to compare to a control group exposed to the same political, socioeconomic, and cultural context-factors as the group members. In addition, the attempt to establish the potential role of chance encounters would require a focus on individual life paths. The optimal method for studying some of these factors and mechanisms would be through participant observation in radical or radicalizing groups. Yet, the practical difficulties and ethical issues entailed are likely to make this very difficult. Qualitative interviews with group and control group members would offer an alternative and valuable source. Other sources would be an analysis of the communication by and within the group as well as qualitative interviews with external individuals such as teachers, parents, friends, and social workers.

## 4. Conclusion

When, why, and how do people living in a democracy become radicalized to the point of being willing to use or directly support the use of terrorist violence against civilians, and when, why, and how might they de-radicalize and draw back from such action? The empirical basis for understanding the background factors and trigger events pushing or pulling people towards Islamist militancy is very limited. Moreover, there is no consensus within the research community as to which theories and approaches offer the most promising avenues for further exploration.

This working paper has discussed various possible approaches within the subfield of socio-psychological and psychological approaches to terrorism studies and indicated some promising areas for further research. Together with the working paper “Studying Violent radicalization in Europe. The Potential Contribution of Social Movement Theory” it provides an overview over and discusses some of the different potential theoretical approaches to studying and understanding the phenomenon of violent radicalization in Europe.

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The research focuses on processes of radicalization, particularly in Europe, and on the effectiveness and possible side effects of different national and international measures to counter terrorism.

Research subjects are formulated in consultation with the Danish Council for Strategic Research as well as with representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Justice. The actual research and the conclusions of the research are entirely independent, and do not necessarily correspond to the views of the ministries involved or any other government agency, nor do they constitute any official DIIS position.

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