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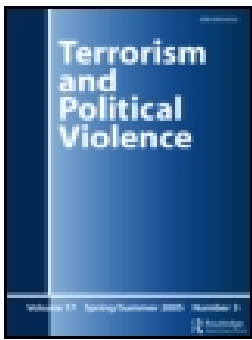
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Structural influences on involvement in European homegrown jihadism: A case study

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ABSTRACT

This article empirically assesses the applicability of structural-level hypotheses for involvement in terrorism within the context of European homegrown jihadism. It uses these hypotheses to study how structural factors influenced involvement in the Dutch “Hofstadgroup.” Structural factors *enabled* the group’s emergence and its participants’ adoption of extremist views. They also *motivated* involvement in political violence and a shift in some participants’ focus from joining Islamist insurgents overseas to committing terrorism in the Netherlands. Finally, structural factors *precipitated* an actual terrorist attack. No support is found for the frequently encountered argument that discrimination and exclusion drive involvement in European homegrown jihadism. Instead, geopolitical grievances were prime drivers of this process.

KEYWORDS

Hofstadgroup; homegrown jihadism; levels of analysis; the Netherlands; primary sources; structural-level factors

Introduction

In November 2004, a participant in the Dutch homegrown¹ jihadist “Hofstadgroup” murdered the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Arrests revealed a group of approximately 40 people, centered on an inner circle of Salafi-Jihadist² militants, some of whom appeared to be planning further acts of terrorism.³ Using new primary-sources based data, this article presents a qualitative analysis of the role that structural-level factors played in bringing about involvement in the Hofstadgroup. The results underline their role in providing motives, opportunities, and triggers for involvement in terrorist groups and terrorist violence. Additionally, they add to a growing body of literature that questions whether involvement in homegrown jihadism stems from socioeconomic inequality or discrimination. Instead they point to the key role played by geopolitical grievances.

Numerous hypotheses exist for involvement in terrorism that are rooted in structural-level factors. But owing to the long-standing scarcity of primary-sources based data in the study of terrorism, few publications empirically ascertain their validity.⁴ This problem is reflected in the literature that focuses specifically on European homegrown jihadism. Although numerous authors have looked at the influence of structural-level factors on this form of violent extremism, these analyses are largely based on secondary sources.⁵ As King and Taylor wrote in 2011, “empirical verification of the existing assumptions surrounding the process leading up to terrorism should take precedence over additional theorizing.”⁶ This article contributes to a more empirically substantiated understanding of the roles that structural-level factors play in bringing about involvement in European

homegrown jihadism. It does so by utilizing extensive and unique primary-sources based data on a key example of this typology: namely, the Dutch Hofstadgroup.

Single case study research designs cannot, of course, sustain broad generalizations about how structural-level factors influence involvement in European homegrown jihadism. But they can provide empirical evidence relevant to the confirmation or refutation of structural-level hypotheses for such involvement. Thus the present article can function as a step toward a more empirically robust understanding of the roles that structural-level factors play in initiating and sustaining participation in European homegrown jihadist terrorism. Hopefully, these findings will ultimately contribute to the verification of existing assumptions that is at present too frequently missing.

To be clear, structural-level factors are not seen as a special category of explanatory variables. Factors such as poverty or inequality do not warrant the “root causes” label politicians are still apt to apply to them.⁷ A comprehensive understanding of involvement in terrorism requires that the structural-level perspective be complemented by group- and individual-level analyses. In his PhD thesis, the first author makes such an attempt by studying involvement in the Hofstadgroup from structural-, group-, and individual-level perspectives. Because of its size, that analysis cannot be compressed in its entirety into an article without losing a considerable amount of detail and nuance. Instead, the following pages focus exclusively on the structural level of analysis while emphasizing that this is but one of several perspectives from which to study involvement in homegrown jihadist terrorism.

A structural-level perspective on involvement in terrorism

Students of terrorism⁸ frequently distinguish between micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses, generally translating them respectively into a focus on the individual, the group, and the structural conditions in which they operate.⁹ Factors influencing involvement in terrorism are understood to be structural when they relate to the social, cultural, economic, or (geo)political *environment* in which people live.¹⁰ Examples include widespread poverty, profound social inequality, war, or regional instability and lack of political freedoms.¹¹ Structural factors can also take the form of specific events which decisively shape individuals’ immediate surroundings, such as a government’s sudden and violent crackdown on a protest. Essentially, structural-level factors can be conducive to involvement in terrorism in three ways; by *enabling* or *motivating* involvement or by supplying *triggers* that lead to the commission of an act of terrorism.

This tripartite distinction is based on Crenshaw’s classic work on the causes of terrorism. It distinguishes between “*preconditions*, factors that set the stage for terrorism over the long run, and *precipitants*, specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism.”¹² Crenshaw further distinguishes between preconditions that “provide opportunities for terrorism to happen,” and those that “directly inspire and motivate terrorist campaigns.”¹³ This is a crucial distinction, as an *opportunity* alone is unlikely to lead to terrorism unless it is matched by a *motive* for such violence. Structural-level precipitants are events outside of individuals’ direct control that put a spark to the volatile mixture of opportunity and motive. While often thought of in terms of excessive use of force by the authorities, precipitants need not be violent in nature. As later paragraphs will illustrate, the broadcast of an Islam-critical film was a key event for the Hofstadgroup, triggering one participant to use violence.

Crenshaw's distinction between preconditions and precipitants has been used to organize the most commonly encountered structural-level hypotheses for involvement in terrorism (Table 1). Clearly, not all of these hypothetical factors are relevant to a European homegrown jihadist group such as the Hofstadgroup. Absolute poverty, a sudden marked population growth, or state failure have simply not been characteristics of the modern-day Netherlands. Neither was the country undergoing a process of urbanization or modernization, beset by armed conflict or social unrest, suddenly exposed to the vagaries of a globalized economy or affected by "spillover" from regional conflicts. Rather than discuss all of these factors in detail only to conclude their absence or irrelevance, the discussion limits itself to those that are in theory applicable to the Netherlands and for which there is at least some empirical support in the data. These have been asterisked.

The Hofstadgroup

The Hofstadgroup was an amorphous group of circa 40 young Dutch Muslims, active between 2002 and 2005. While participants shared a fundamentalist Salafi interpretation of Islam, only a hard-core of Salafi-Jihadist extremists believed the use of violence was justified and necessary. In 2003, several of them tried to join Islamist insurgents in Chechnya and Afghanistan. From late 2003 onwards, the focus of some of these extremists shifted towards carrying out terrorist attacks in the Netherlands. In November 2004, one inner-circle member murdered filmmaker Van Gogh for blasphemy. The arrests that followed crippled the group, but in 2005 its remnants staged a comeback of sorts and became involved in as many as three potential terrorist plots. One of these appears to have targeted Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the other explored the possibilities for shooting down an El Al airliner over Schiphol airport, and the last one targeted the secret service AIVD and several Dutch politicians. Arrests in July and October prevented these plots moving beyond tentative planning stages and marked the group's definite end.¹⁴

The Hofstadgroup is no "quintessential" example of homegrown jihadism.¹⁵ However, the group's organizational ambiguity and the fact that it proved capable of deadly violence despite its participants' lack of (significant) paramilitary training or experience, allow comparisons to be drawn with a subset of European homegrown jihadist groups that shared these characteristics.¹⁶ Furthermore, the similarities between the Hofstadgroup's

Table 1. Structural explanations for involvement in terrorism.

Preconditions: Enablers	Preconditions: Motives	Precipitants
The Internet*	(Relative) Deprivation*	Govt's excessive use of force
Popular support for terrorism*	Intergroup inequality*	Government attempts reforms
External assistance*	Political grievances*	
Social/cultural facilitation of violence*	Clash of value systems*	
Ineffective counterterrorism*	Economic globalization	
Political opportunity structure*	Cultural globalization	
Modernization	Urbanization	
Population growth/youth bulge	Modernization	
Shifts ethnic/religious balance society	Spillover from other conflicts	
Urbanization	State sponsorship of terrorism	
Mass media	Power structure internat. system	
Organized crime—terrorism nexus	Failed/failing states	
	Armed conflict	

Note. Some factors can function as both enablers and as motivators of involvement and are therefore included under both headings.

*Hypothetical factors that are in theory applicable to the Netherlands and for which there is at least some empirical support in the data.

earliest ambitions to become foreign fighters and the current exodus of young Western jihadists to Syria and Iraq, as well as the shared ideological outlook, suggest that insights drawn from this case have relevance for the current iteration of the homegrown threat as well. Therefore the Hofstadgroup is still a suitable basis for tentative generalizations about European homegrown jihadism.

Research method and sources

This article assesses how structural factors influenced participants' involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup. The authors' access to large amounts of primary data on the group makes it tempting to let this material speak for itself. A more structured form of analysis was chosen in order to maximize the explanatory potential of the material. Those structural-level factors deemed applicable to the Hofstadgroup case study (Table 1) were used as analytical lenses through which to study the available data. Thus a theoretically guided and empirically informed understanding emerged of how structural-level factors influenced involvement in the Hofstadgroup.

The data used in this study consist of the Dutch police files on the Hofstadgroup and semi-structured interviews with six Dutch government officials involved in the investigation and prosecution of this group, as well as five former Hofstadgroup participants. Consisting of information gathered through the questioning of suspects and witnesses, house searches, wiretaps, the contents of suspects' computers, logs of their online activities, and a degree of intelligence data, the files are an extensive and detailed resource on participants' behavior and motives. The interviews, particularly those with former participants, offer unique insights into how and why individuals became involved as well as a look at the group's internal functioning.

Both sources need to be critically appraised. One issue with the police files is their one-sided perspective, essentially voicing the Dutch authorities' views on what happened. The interviews with participants are important as a way of balancing this perspective but present issues with regard to reliability. Both sources are affected by transparency issues, as neither is publicly available. Where possible, these two primary sources are combined and complemented with additional information derived from open source articles, media reporting, and government reports to produce a nuanced, accurate and, where possible, verifiable, account. For ethical and privacy-related reasons, all references to individuals have been anonymized.

Preconditions: Enabling involvement in homegrown jihadism

The preconditions discussed in this section primarily influence the *opportunities* for engaging in terrorism. The qualification is important. While the primary contribution of the factors discussed in this section was to enable involvement in the Hofstadgroup, they frequently also exerted an (indirect) motivational influence.

The internet

The Internet can provide opportunities for involvement in terrorism in several ways. It can be used to gain knowledge about the construction and use of explosives. It can bring together like-minded individuals regardless of their physical distance from one another and can link local militants to broader global movements while providing at least a degree of anonymity.¹⁷

The web can also function as an easy-to-use propaganda platform, making a terrorist group's message instantly available to a potential audience of millions. By projecting images of war and injustice across the globe, the Internet allows some of its users to suffer vicariously.¹⁸ As such, the Internet can have a crucial influence on what Egerton calls the construction of a "political imaginary" in which young Muslims from Western countries establish common cause with "brothers and sisters" they will most likely never meet.¹⁹

All of these functions of the Internet influenced the Hofstadgroup's emergence. By providing easy access to large amounts of information on Islam, jihadist groups, and geopolitical affairs, the Internet became a key enabler of participants' adoption of radical and extremist views.²⁰ Data suggest that for some, the Internet became a source of answers to questions that parents and imams were unwilling or unable to discuss.²¹ Does Islam condone terrorism? What is the cause of the Palestinians' plight? Why had the United States and its allies intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq? The web also made available information of a more practical sort. One participant was found in possession of photographs and maps of Dutch government buildings and critical infrastructure that he had downloaded, possibly as part of a reconnaissance of potential targets.²² Several others had downloaded bomb-making manuals.²³

A number of participants met each other online before developing a "real-world" connection.²⁴ In the fall of 2003, two participants used the web to reach out to other young Muslims in order to entice them to travel to Pakistan or Afghanistan.²⁵ From the summer of 2004 until early 2005, one member of the group's inner circle in particular utilized online communication tools to instill the "right" interpretation of Islam in some (aspiring) participants.²⁶ These examples show that the Internet also provided opportunities for the group's organizational and ideological development and enabled its activities. Finally, the Internet served as a propaganda tool.²⁷ Participants made and administered simple websites that expounded extremist interpretations of Islam, advocated the rejection of democracy, and glorified terrorism. Such sites also offered practical advice on preparing for jihad, advertised materials published by participants, in particular Van Gogh's future murderer, and threatened the group's enemies in texts and videos.²⁸

Popular support for terrorism

The importance of popular support for non-state actors who violently challenge a state's power has long been recognized in the context of guerrilla warfare and, more recently, counterinsurgency operations.²⁹ Popular support can be seen as a vital resource for terrorist and insurgent groups, providing them with the weapons, finances, recruits, and intelligence necessary to carry out a prolonged campaign of violence.³⁰ Conversely, when such non-state actors lose the support of the people they claim to represent, they are frequently unable to persevere against the materially stronger government forces that hunt them.³¹

Leiken has claimed that the Hofstadgroup enjoyed far more popular support than "marginal" terrorist groups such as the Italian Red Brigades (BR) or the German Red Army Faction (RAF).³² However, these groups could count on substantial support, especially among students, while there simply is no evidence that the Hofstadgroup was receiving similar support from the Dutch Muslim community.³³ Unlike the BR and RAF, the Hofstadgroup did not inspire imitation; no follow-up generations of terrorists materialized after the October 2005 arrests. The group's extremist stance on what constituted

“true” Islam and the (implied) allegations of apostasy that it leveled against the majority of (Dutch) Muslims, effectively ruled out the possibility of broad public support.³⁴ The Hofstadgroup was not a popularly supported vanguard movement fighting for commonly held grievances, but a fringe group that intimidated its potential supporters almost as much as it threatened its declared enemies.³⁵

External assistance

External sources of support, whether other terrorist groups, state sponsors, transnational private support networks, or diasporas that back militancy, can significantly increase the opportunities for engaging in terrorism.³⁶ These parties can make available funding, weapons, and the opportunity to participate in paramilitary training camps. They can also provide guidance or even outright operational leadership, thus facilitating preparations for a terrorist attack.³⁷

The police files make numerous suggestions that the Hofstadgroup was under some form of external guidance or enjoyed external assistance. The absence of corroborative evidence for most of these claims suggests that they should be treated as highly speculative. Examples include the Dutch intelligence service AIVD’s claim that the Hofstadgroup’s Syrian religious instructor belonged to a group that “could be seen as a successor or branch of the Bin Laden organization.”³⁸ Similarly, there is nothing to corroborate the possibility, again raised by the AIVD, that the group had external donors in Saudi Arabia or among Dutch Muslims who wanted it to murder politicians critical of Islam.³⁹

The most plausible ties between the Hofstadgroup and foreign extremists came to light in October 2003. At that time, it became clear that those participants who had traveled to Pakistan or Afghanistan over the summer were in touch with an unnamed “emir” from that region, as well as with a Moroccan man in Spain who was suspected of involvement in the 2003 Casablanca bombings.⁴⁰ Yet there is no concrete evidence to suggest that these ties amounted to outside operational guidance. The “emir” most likely tasked the Hofstadgroup participants in question with convincing other Dutch Muslims to travel to Pakistan or Afghanistan and the Moroccan man appears to have solicited the group’s help in order to remain at large.⁴¹

It is possible, however, that the two participants who traveled to Pakistan or Afghanistan underwent some form of paramilitary training there. Not only did one of the travelers repeatedly claim as much, his use of a hand grenade against the police officers who came to arrest him in November 2004 and his utilization of a mirror to observe them while remaining behind cover, suggest at least some training in the use of weapons.⁴² In short, the Hofstadgroup’s emergence was not meaningfully enabled by either external leadership or support, with the possible exception that up to two of its participants received rudimentary weapons training while abroad.

Social or cultural facilitation of violence

Individuals exposed to cultural or social values that convey a negative attitude towards out-groups or glorify violence may be more likely to see the use of terrorism as justifiable.⁴³ Several empirical studies indicate that Muslims *in general* are not more likely than non-Muslims to commit or suffer from political violence.⁴⁴ At the same time, research also

suggests that *fundamentalist* and *militant interpretations* of Islam can inculcate intolerance, hatred, and a positive disposition towards the use of force as a means of dealing with perceived enemies.⁴⁵

A 2015 study by Koopmans indicates that fundamentalist views are widespread among Sunni Muslims in a variety of European countries, including the Netherlands.⁴⁶ More than fifty percent of Muslims polled believed that the West was out to destroy Islam, a figure that rose to more than seventy percent among “very religious fundamentalist Muslims.”⁴⁷ Similarly high percentages did not “want homosexuals as friends” and believed that “Jews cannot be trusted.”⁴⁸ The data for this particular study were collected in 2008 and across several countries. However, it seems reasonable to assume that these views did not suddenly develop and thus that many of the Hofstadgroup’s participants grew up in a social environment in which similar views were prevalent—all the more so since numerous participants attended mosques in which the fundamentalist Salafist brand of Islam was preached.⁴⁹

Reports published in 2004 and 2012 by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) provide further indications of orthodox views among Dutch Muslims. For instance, 30 percent of Moroccan Muslims found that Islam and “modern life” were incompatible.⁵⁰ A majority of the same group adhered to orthodox interpretations of their faith.⁵¹ Both practicing and non-practicing Muslims held negative views of homosexuality.⁵² While such findings do not directly support Koopmans’ conclusions, by providing indications of the prevalence of orthodoxy among Dutch Moroccan Muslims, the great importance this group attached to its Islamic identity and the prevalence of negative attitudes to one of the groups mentioned in Koopmans’ work, they do lend further credibility to the latter’s study.

This leads to the tentative conclusion that, by instilling a sense of hostility towards the Western world, social facilitation of fundamentalism likely lowered Hofstadgroup participants’ threshold to seeing the use of violence as legitimate. This is anecdotally supported by the finding that family members of Van Gogh’s murderer who resided in Morocco, together with some of the other residents of their village, showed support for the attack.⁵³

Ineffective counterterrorism

After Van Gogh’s death, the Dutch Review Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services (CTIVD) concluded that the AIVD had incorrectly dismissed the filmmaker’s murderer as a peripheral member of the Hofstadgroup.⁵⁴ Although the AIVD had possessed information that the future killer fulfilled a central role in the Hofstadgroup, had a history of violent behavior, and was writing increasingly extremist tracts, these data had not been analyzed in their totality before the murder.⁵⁵ The CTIVD was careful to stress that the AIVD did not possess information indicating that Van Gogh’s murderer was planning to commit an attack.⁵⁶ Whether extra attention from the AIVD would have prevented Van Gogh’s killer from striking therefore remains highly speculative. At the very least, the AIVD’s misdiagnosis benefited the killer by allowing him to carry out his preparations largely unnoticed.

What clearly did enable Van Gogh’s killer to strike was the fact that his target was easily accessible. As a public figure, Van Gogh was easily recognized and because he cycled to his work in Amsterdam he was also easy to approach. Crucially, he had steadfastly refused the Dutch authorities’ offer of personal protection following the airing of *Submission, part 1* in August 2004, a controversial and Islam-critical film that Van Gogh had directed. By

contrast, the film's co-creator, Somali-born politician and former Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali, had been under round-the-clock protection since November 2002.⁵⁷ This difference probably explains why the killer chose Van Gogh over Hirsi Ali, whose status as an "apostate" would otherwise have made her the more attractive target.⁵⁸ Arguably, Van Gogh's decision not to accept personal protection provided a larger opportunity for his killer to strike than the AIVD's misdiagnosis.

Political opportunity structure

The "political opportunity structure" approach essentially straddles the gap between preconditions that provide opportunities and those that supply motives for terrorism.⁵⁹ Adherents of the "strategic school" argue that the openness of democratic societies can enable violent acts of resistance.⁶⁰ Institutions such as a free press and an independent judiciary limit the power of the government over its citizens while basic rights such as freedom of assembly and the largely unrestricted movement of people and goods make it easier to prepare acts of violence.⁶¹ By contrast, because autocratic regimes lack such freedoms and suffer no restraints on their executive power, the opportunities for engaging in terrorism are fewer.⁶²

With regard to motive, the "political access school" argues that democracies discourage terrorism because they provide avenues for the non-violent resolution of conflicts and create opportunities for citizens to pursue policy change without resort to the use of force.⁶³ Here it is autocratic regimes that are at a disadvantage, as their lack of freedoms, frequent human rights abuses, and the absence of opportunities for pursuing peaceful change leave violent opposition as the only option.⁶⁴ However, there is considerable empirical evidence that democracies are no less vulnerable to terrorism.⁶⁵ This may stem in part from the fact that, while democratic states are less likely to experience domestic terrorism, their frequently assertive foreign policies increase their exposure to international terrorism.⁶⁶

The Hofstadgroup benefited from the democratic freedoms available to it. Arguably it would have been far more difficult in an authoritarian regime to hold frequent private meetings, use the Internet to espouse extremist views and attract like-minded individuals, and to travel abroad to Belgium, Spain, and even Pakistan or Afghanistan. At the same time, the Dutch authorities did not have to stand idly by. Tempering the opportunities provided by the Dutch political system was the fact that several group participants were effectively under AIVD surveillance from mid-2002 onwards. Combined with numerous rounds of arrests between 2003 and 2005, this proved a considerable impediment to the group's ability to function.⁶⁷

A more concrete conclusion is that access to the political system had little dampening effect on the Hofstadgroup's more committed participants' motivation to use violence. Initially, some participants appeared to have a modicum of faith in democratic forms of protest. Two attended rallies; one in support of Palestine in 2002, and one against the Iraq war in 2003.⁶⁸ One of these individuals was also temporarily a member of the Arab European League (AEL) in 2003, but quickly disowned it because "[they] want everything via democracy."⁶⁹ Other participants never even considered such avenues. One interviewee argued vehemently that the AEL had never held any appeal for himself or the others because its leader was a Shiite, a denomination they considered heretical and worse than

unbelievers.⁷⁰ More generally, the data suggest that the group saw democratic means for voicing dissent or achieving change as ineffective and even illegitimate as it meant working with and within a man-made democratic system rather than a divinely-inspired one.⁷¹

Preconditions: Motivating involvement in homegrown jihadism

Opportunities alone are unlikely to lead to terrorism unless groups or individuals with the *motive* to carry out acts of violence make use of them. It is to this second category of structural-level preconditions that the discussion now turns.

(Relative) deprivation and intergroup inequality

A common-sense assumption frequently voiced by politicians is that poverty and lack of education are causes of terrorism.⁷² Scholarship on the issue provides a rather more nuanced picture. Some studies underwrite this view, finding that countries experience less terrorism as they become economically more developed⁷³ and that increased personal wealth is linked to decreased support for political violence.⁷⁴ Utilizing opinion polling, Fair and Shepherd conclude that the moderately poor are more likely to support terrorism.⁷⁵ Looking specifically at European homegrown jihadism, Bakker's study shows that most individuals in his sample came from a relatively low socioeconomic background.⁷⁶

Conversely, Piazza finds no significant relationship between low economic development and terrorism.⁷⁷ Various scholars posit that terrorists are less likely to come from impoverished backgrounds than their peers.⁷⁸ In contrast to the Bakker study, the jihadists in Sageman's study mostly enjoyed a relatively well-off middle-class existence.⁷⁹ A similar dichotomy emerges with regard to the relationship between education and terrorism. Some studies encourage the idea that terrorism attracts the uneducated.⁸⁰ Others fail to support such hypotheses or reach diametrically opposed conclusions.⁸¹ Given these conflicting findings, it is unclear whether poverty and lack of education *as such* can motivate involvement in terrorism.

Research suggests that deprivation's ability to contribute to the onset of political violence is particularly pronounced when it is experienced *relative* to other individuals or groups. Gurr defines relative deprivation as the perceived discrepancy between the "values" people expect to achieve, such as political influence or material well-being, and their actual capacity for doing so.⁸² When groups perceive that they are unfairly economically disadvantaged or politically disenfranchised vis-à-vis another class, religious group, or ethnic minority, relative deprivation can become a powerful motivation for political action and, potentially, violence.⁸³ Poverty or socioeconomic disadvantages become markedly more potent motivational preconditions for terrorism when they overlap with intergroup inequality.⁸⁴

A 2005 report on the integration of minorities in the Netherlands indicated that non-Western immigrants and their children were socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to the indigenous population. For instance, they had lower educational qualifications, were more likely to be unemployed, earned less income, underperformed at school, and were disproportionately represented in statistics on crime.⁸⁵ Another report showed that Dutch Muslims faced discrimination on the labor market.⁸⁶ Given the predominance of Dutch Moroccans in the Hofstadgroup, it is interesting to note that the Moroccan community is frequently cited as

the one most strongly affected by these problems.⁸⁷ Researchers have also argued that the increasingly vituperative debate on Islam and multiculturalism in the Netherlands has engendered feelings of alienation among (young) Dutch Muslims.⁸⁸

Relative deprivation therefore seems a plausible motive for the Hofstadgroup's emergence. However, there are virtually no indications that income inequality, lack of access to educational opportunities, political representation, or other tangible examples of intergroup inequality motivated participants' involvement in the group or a desire to commit terrorism. Admittedly, one individual's involvement began when he failed to obtain an internship through what he believed was discrimination because of his Moroccan heritage.⁸⁹ However, this person was quick to emphasize that this experience did not *motivate* involvement but *facilitated* it. Without an internship to go to this person simply had more time to spend on other pursuits, one of which turned out to be a growing interest in radical Islam that would lead towards participation in the group.⁹⁰

There are several indications of participants experiencing a sense of being second-rate citizens because of their faith. Take for instance one participant's reaction to news that a Dutch prisoner who murdered an Iraqi man was released from jail; "your blood is blood, but our blood is water."⁹¹ Several encountered (verbal) aggression aimed at their religious convictions or Moroccan heritage.⁹² Others spoke out angrily against what they saw as the media's unfavorable portrayal of Islam, its tendency to underreport Muslim suffering around the globe, and its vilification of men like Osama bin-Laden as terrorists.⁹³ In some of his writings, Van Gogh's future murderer criticized the Dutch government's integration policies, which he saw as attempts to encourage Muslims to abandon their faith.⁹⁴

Such experiences with discrimination strengthened participants' convictions and fed their hatred for unbelievers. But, one potential exception notwithstanding,⁹⁵ there is little to suggest that these experiences triggered or motivated involvement or that they were central to some participants' planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism. In fact, various findings *disavow* this line of reasoning. Several individuals in and around the group spoke positively about their experiences as Muslims in the Netherlands and praised the country's religious freedom.⁹⁶ More importantly, although the Dutch "debate on Islam" had been gaining momentum since the 1990s, it did not really become a topic of conversation within the group until the release of the Islam-critical film *Submission* in August 2004.⁹⁷ As one former participant put it, the debate on Islam was "secondary"; while Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh deserved to be killed, this individual was primarily focused on supporting Islamist insurgents in places such as Afghanistan.⁹⁸

It was not discrimination based on ethnicity or religion that motivated the murder of Van Gogh, but blasphemy. Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali became hated public figures because of how they spoke about Islam and its prophet, not because they engendered or exacerbated feelings of exclusion from Dutch society.⁹⁹ Which is not to say that experiences of exclusion, or feelings of being second-rate citizens did not exert an influence on the group's development. They contributed to the drawing of sharper boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in the Netherlands and increased participants' antagonistic views of the latter. The available data on the Hofstadgroup, however, do not allow relative deprivation to be ascribed more than such a supportive role when explaining how its participants became involved.

Political grievances

The perception that governments or their policies are unjust and lack legitimacy can provide a powerful impetus for participation in political violence.¹⁰⁰ From this perspective, people turn to terrorism because they see it as a tool they can use to exert political influence.

The data reveal that numerous participants reacted strongly to armed conflicts involving Muslims. News about the suffering of co-religionists in places like Palestine or about terrorist attacks carried out by Muslims had a range of effects. As vicarious experiences of injustice and shock, they helped bring about an interest in Islam and geopolitics, triggering searches for information that contributed to the adoption of radical and extremist interpretations of Islam.¹⁰¹ As an interviewee recalled his reaction to the 9/11 attacks: “At first you think like ‘terrible, what happened there . . . No religion can justify that.’ So you investigate. . . . And then I found a fatwa by [Hamoud al-Aqla al-Shuebi] . . . in which he approved of [the attacks] . . . and I thought it was nice to see how he explained all that and actually also presented evidence [of its permissibility].”¹⁰²

These geopolitical events also helped shape a Manichean outlook in which “true” Muslims were assaulted by both external and internal enemies; principally, the United States, its Western-European allies, Israel, and what participants considered apostate or heretical Muslims.¹⁰³ Particularly influential in this regard was the U.S.-led “War on Terror,” which many participants saw as a war against Islam.¹⁰⁴ As one wrote, “I gained feelings of hate towards anyone who supported Bush in his crusade, not just the Netherlands, but also Arabic apostate leaders.”¹⁰⁵ Another important effect of these geopolitical grievances was their ability to justify violence by portraying it as a defensive and righteous response to Muslim suffering.¹⁰⁶ One of the travelers to Pakistan/Afghanistan wrote his mother explaining that he had left because the ummah was under attack; he had gone to help expel the unbelievers from the land of jihad.¹⁰⁷

In early 2003, the desire to help Muslims in conflict zones led one of the group’s most committed extremists to attempt to reach Islamist insurgents in Chechnya.¹⁰⁸ Later that year, three others traveled to Pakistan or Afghanistan, likely with a similar purpose in mind. By late 2003, however, the focus of the Hofstadgroup’s militant core began to shift towards possible actions within the Netherlands. This transition was partly practical; by this time the group had clearly attracted the attention of the police and AIVD, making foreign travel much more difficult. It was also influenced by political grievances; as a loyal ally of the United States and Israel, and as a contributor to the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Dutch government was increasingly seen as sharing responsibility for the harm that had befallen Muslims and had, to some Hofstadgroup participants, therefore become a legitimate target.¹⁰⁹

It was not just the perception of a global “war against Islam” that motivated participation in the Hofstadgroup or spurred a desire to utilize political violence. One interviewee stated that the March 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid had demonstrated to him and his colleagues that terrorism in Europe was both legitimate and effective.¹¹⁰ This event further shifted the group towards waging jihad at home rather than overseas. In the absence of geopolitical events involving the perceived victimization of Muslim populations and the violent responses that this elicited from groups like al-Qaeda, the Hofstadgroup would arguably not have existed or developed in the way it did. Geopolitically inspired grievances were a key structural-level factor leading to the Hofstadgroup’s emergence and motivating the violent intentions of some of its most extremist participants.

Clash of value systems

Several authors have argued that European homegrown jihadism arose out of a fundamental incompatibility between radical Islam and liberal democracy.¹¹¹ It is a line of reasoning that resembles Huntington's thesis that the dominant source of post-Cold War conflict would be "the fault lines between civilizations."¹¹² The broader literature on political violence is, however, equivocal on the matter. For instance, while Senechal de la Roche argues that greater "cultural distance" is positively associated with a higher probability of collective violence,¹¹³ Fearon and Laitin find no clear link between ethnic or religious diversity and the outbreak of civil wars and insurgencies.¹¹⁴

The Hofstadgroup's radical and extremist views and its participants' rejection of democratic laws, values, and institutions certainly made them incompatible with Dutch liberal democracy. Furthering this divide, many participants did not see themselves as Dutch.¹¹⁵ This conclusion should be qualified, however, by the point that these attitudes do not appear to have motivated involvement in the Hofstadgroup but rather to have stemmed from it. Prior to their involvement in the group, most participants led apparently well-integrated lives; attending school, holding (part-time) work, and enjoying recreational activities like other Dutch citizens their age. Several individuals did not become practicing Muslims until contact with Hofstadgroup participants led to a reorientation on their faith.¹¹⁶ Others were converts to Islam. Even among those who had had a religious upbringing, clear signs of hostility towards Western culture and politics did not manifest themselves until after they had adopted radical or extremist interpretations of Islam.

These findings underline the importance of distinguishing between Islam and radical or extremist interpretations of the religion such as Salafi-Jihadism. The available data provide little to suggest that the Hofstadgroup was a manifestation of an inherent incompatibility between Islam and Western democracy. They do, however, show that such an adversarial relationship developed once radical and extremist views were adopted. This speaks to the power of the Salafi-Jihadist ideological narrative to instill or sharpen pre-existing in-group/out-group distinctions and thus lay the basis for intergroup hostility and violence.

Precipitants: Triggering acts of terrorism

Precipitants are "specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism."¹¹⁷ Given that Van Gogh's murder was the only terrorist attack to actually be carried out by a Hofstadgroup participant, can a precipitant event be identified in the period leading up to it? It seems highly likely that the killer was triggered by the broadcast of the short film *Submission, part 1* on August 29, 2004 on Dutch national television.¹¹⁸ Although Van Gogh's assailant never explicitly referred to the film in his writings or in court, he chose to murder its director and he stabbed a note onto his body threatening Hirsi Ali, the Islam-critical Dutch politician who came up with the idea for the film.

Additional, albeit circumstantial, corroboration for this conclusion is that other Hofstadgroup participants also reacted strongly, if only in words, to the film. Death threats were posted on Hofstadgroup-administered forums,¹¹⁹ at least one individual told another participant he wanted to see Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh killed because of *Submission*,¹²⁰ and several, while disagreeing with the murder, believed Van Gogh

essentially had “asked for it.”¹²¹ One interviewee claimed that the film helped swing the group’s focus towards waging jihad in the Netherlands.¹²² Despite the shared antagonism, however, it was only Van Gogh’s killer who acted.

Conclusion

Numerous hypotheses exist with regard to the roles that structural-level factors can play in bringing about involvement in terrorism. Reflecting a broader problem in the study of terrorism, however, the majority of these hypotheses have not been assessed for validity using high-quality empirical data. This article sought to make a contribution toward remedying this situation by marrying unique and extensive primary-sources based data with frequently encountered structural-level explanations for involvement in terrorism. Focusing specifically on the European homegrown jihadist typology of terrorism, this article studied how structural-level factors enabled and motivated involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, and looked at their role in triggering the one successfully executed terrorist attack undertaken by a group participant.

With regard to facilitation, the role of the Internet was especially important. It exposed Hofstadgroup participants to geopolitical developments, militant interpretations of Islam, practical knowledge on the use of weapons and explosives and formed an easy-to-use communications tool and propaganda platform. Another facilitating factor was the openness of Dutch society, which afforded the group considerable freedom to organize, travel, and propagate their views. Thirdly, it is likely that growing up in a social environment in which Islamic fundamentalist views were prevalent lowered at least some participants’ threshold to seeing the use of violence as a legitimate by instilling a sense of out-group hostility directed at the Western world. Finally, the AIVD’s misdiagnosis of Van Gogh’s killer as a peripheral group participant and in particular Van Gogh’s refusal to accept police protection increased the attacker’s opportunities to strike.

Looking at motivational preconditions, geopolitical grievances stand out. Conflicts involving Muslim populations, the U.S.-led “war on terror,” and terrorist attacks such as those orchestrated on 9/11 had several effects. They triggered searches for answers that contributed to group participants’ eventual adoption of radical and extremist views, instilled the conviction that a war against Islam was being waged, and made retaliatory violence seem both justified and necessary. Whereas the group’s most militant participants initially tried to join Islamist insurgents in Chechnya and Afghanistan, the failure of these attempts and the Dutch contribution to the War on Terror led some of these men to begin thinking about plotting acts of terrorism at home. Structural factors thus had a hand in shifting their focus from becoming foreign fighters to conducting terrorism at home.

Perhaps surprisingly, there are no clear indications that socioeconomic inequality, the harsh tone of the Dutch integration debate, or lack of access to the democratic political system directly motivated involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Experiences with discrimination did, however, strengthen participants’ convictions and feed their hatred of unbelievers. Finally, the precipitant event that likely triggered the one actual terrorist attack to emerge from the Hofstadgroup, the murder of Theo van Gogh, was the broadcast of the short Islam-critical film *Submission*.

The structural level of analysis is just one of several perspectives on the factors that can lead to involvement in terrorism. A comprehensive understanding of how and why people

become involved in this form of political violence requires incorporating individual- and group-level explanations as well. Similarly, the Hofstadgroup is just one case among many belonging to the European homegrown jihadist typology. Achieving a more generalizable and empirically robust understanding of what drives people to become and remain involved in terrorism, whatever its particular variety, will require both a broad analytical perspective and multi-case, comparative research. Key to both approaches is the utilization of high quality, primary-sources based data so that our assumptions about involvement processes may find a more solid empirical footing.

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102. Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal Interview 2," 11.
103. A.[.] (see note 20 above), "Deurwaarders," 4–5, 7, 9; Police Files Hofstadgroup, 01/13: 163; Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal Interview 1," 6–7; Peters (see note 35 above), appendix: 33.
104. A.[.] (see note 20 above), "Deurwaarders," 4, 7, 9; Police Files Hofstadgroup, 01/13: 173; GET: 4127–28; Erkel (see note 68 above), 74–75; Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal Interview 1," 6–7; Groen and Kranenberg (see note 20 above), 19; Peters (see note 35 above), appendix: 33.
105. A.[.] (see note 20 above), 9.
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