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Becoming a European homegrown jihadist: a multilevel analysis of involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005

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4. The ideological and organizational nature of the Hofstadgroup³⁰⁵

4.1 Introduction

The Hofstadgroup is frequently described as a homegrown jihadist terrorist network³⁰⁶ and has even been labeled a ‘quintessential’ one.³⁰⁷ But to what extent is this designation justified? Before examining how and why involvement in this group came about, it must be made clear what participants were becoming involved *in*. The present chapter discusses what the Hofstadgroup was by critically examining the characteristics commonly attributed to it, beginning with its ‘homegrown’ dimension and continuing to its ideological convictions. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the Hofstadgroup’s organizational characteristics and finally the degree to which it was communally involved in terrorism.

4.1.1 Drawing the Hofstadgroup’s boundaries

When discussing what the Hofstadgroup was, a first difficulty is defining the group’s size; who exactly were its participants? Due to its ambiguous organizational structure and lack of anything resembling a formal list of ‘members’, this is a difficult question to answer. Here, the Hofstadgroup is assumed to have encompassed approximately 38 individuals.³⁰⁸ This number includes all those arrested as suspected group members during the various investigations, witnesses who participated in group meetings at least once, as well as any individuals listed in suspects’ or witnesses’ statements that also matched this criterion. This definition of ‘participation’ is by no means definitive but it provides a basic way of demarcating the group’s boundaries. It is also supported by an interviewee, who explained that the group was broader than those arrested following Van Gogh’s murder.³⁰⁹ It appears that the public prosecutor was aware of this, but decided to keep several individuals out of the criminal case against the Hofstadgroup in order to keep it manageable.³¹⁰

4.2 Homegrown jihadism

What exactly makes a jihadist group a homegrown one? Crone and Harrow argue that the concept of homegrown terrorism has two dimensions; belonging, or the extent to which the terrorists are

305 This chapter has been published in amended form as: Schuurman, Eijkman, and Bakker, “The Hofstadgroup revisited,” 1-23.

306 E.g.: Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 332-333; Silber and Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West,” 6.

307 Vidino, “The Hofstad group,” 579.

308 Sageman comes to a similar conclusion, see: Sageman, “Hofstad case,” 24.

309 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 3-4.

310 Police Investigator 2, “Personal interview 1,” (Amsterdam2012), 1.

raised in or attached to the West, and their degree of operational autonomy from foreign terrorist groups.³¹¹ The 9/11 attacks, for instance, were clearly *not* a homegrown operation, as the attackers were foreign nationals rather than U.S. citizens and because the attacks were not entirely of their own making but instead coordinated by and executed on behalf of al-Qaeda. Seen from this perspective, how ‘homegrown’ was the Hofstadgroup?

4.2.1 The Hofstadgroup’s homegrown aspects

Looking at ‘belonging’ first, the majority of the 38 participants were born in the Netherlands or held double nationalities. However, there was a sizable minority of foreigners (seven Moroccans, one Syrian). Some of these foreign nationals had spent a significant part of their lives in the Netherlands, making it likely they felt a considerable degree of belonging to the country despite not being citizens. Yet two of the foreign nationals with prominent positions in the group’s radical and extremist inner circle were recent immigrants and thus unlikely to have felt a strong sense of belonging to the country; the middle-aged Syrian man known as Abu Khaled who first arrived in Germany as an asylum seeker in 1995 and a young Moroccan man who played an important role in the group’s 2005 resurgence.³¹² The group was thus mainly but not exclusively a Dutch phenomenon.

Similarly, the Hofstadgroup seems to have enjoyed a high, but not absolute, degree of autonomy. Several participants had connections to foreign nationals whose backgrounds suggest a possible link with Islamist terrorist groups. For instance, Van Gogh’s murderer was acquainted with two Chechen men, one of whose uncle was suspected by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of supplying Chechen jihadists with weapons.³¹³ In addition to Abu Khaled, the Syrian preacher mentioned above, three other middle-aged Syrian men with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood also appeared on the group’s fringes.³¹⁴ Characterizing the nature of these connections is difficult as they were never investigated in detail. It appears, however, that none of these men tried to exert any kind of direct control over the Hofstadgroup, leaving its autonomy intact.

The clearest examples of foreign extremists exerting some form of operational control over (parts of) the group stem from October 2003. The first concerned an Islamist militant residing in Spain, the second centered on an unnamed Pakistani or Afghan ‘emir’ who had apparently instructed one of the Hofstadgroup participants to return to the Netherlands to ‘collect balloons.’³¹⁵ Suspicions that these connections might be in some way related to an impending terrorist attack could not be substantiated. Instead, it seems likely that the militant in Spain sought the group’s assistance

311 Crone and Harrow, “Homegrown terrorism in the West,” 521.

312 Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 40.

313 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/01: 93-96; Derix, “Hoe kwam toch.”

314 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/01: 32, 37; VERD: 19664-19825; GET: 18349, 18415.

315 *Ibid.*, 01/01: 23.

with acquiring a passport and finances and that the emir's instructions revolved around trying to motivate other young Muslims to travel to Pakistan or Afghanistan. The latter point is supported by the fact that two other Hofstadgroup participants undertook a 'recruitment drive' via the internet during the fall of 2003 with precisely that purpose in mind.³¹⁶

As detailed in the previous chapter, the first round of arrests in October 2003 and the failure of the second trip to Pakistan or Afghanistan at the end of the year made the group more cautious and inward looking. While some participants continued to have connections with foreign nationals suspected of extremist views or even terrorist intentions, there were no indications that such links impinged on the group's autonomy in any clear sense. In short, it appears that the Hofstadgroup was predominantly an autonomously operating group and that it became relatively more so from late 2003 onward. At the same time, the small number of examples of outside interference and the prominent positions held by at least two foreign nationals mean that the group was not a homegrown ideal type.

4.3 Ideology and terrorism

Maynard defines ideology as 'a distinctive system of normative, semantic, and/or reputedly factual ideas, typically shared by members of groups or societies, which underpins their understandings of their political world and shapes their political behavior.'³¹⁷ Ideologies are cognitive frameworks that provide a way of ordering information about the world and imbuing it with meaning.³¹⁸ Extremist ideologies can justify violence through their ability to provide motives, (e.g. by painting a specific group as a dangerous threat) legitimacy (e.g. by depicting the use of force as the only option) and rationalizations (e.g. utopian ideals justify using violence).³¹⁹ Extremist ideological beliefs are also an effective way of attenuating individuals' inhibitions against killing or harming others by coupling an acute sense of crisis with a black and white worldview; the in-group's existence is threatened by implacable foes; exceptional circumstances that legitimize and necessitate the use of violence.³²⁰

As later chapters will explore in detail, ideological convictions alone are insufficient to explain involvement in a terrorist group or participation in an act of terrorism. Ideological beliefs *may* directly motivate such behavior, but they are generally one of many factors and not a sufficient explanation in and of themselves. That being said, ideological beliefs can play an important

316 Ibid., 123-126.

317 Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the role of ideology in mass atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 4.

318 Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 90.

319 Maynard, "Rethinking the role of ideology," 8-10.

320 Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 90; Della Porta, *Social movements*, 174-176; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the mind of god: the global rise of religious violence* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2003), 149-163, 174-179; Peter R. Neumann, "Chapter four: the message," *The Adelphi Papers* 48, no. 399 (2008): 47-48; Tom Pyszczynski, Matt Motyl, and Abdolhossein Abdollahi, "Righteous violence: killing for God, country, freedom and justice," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 1, no. 1 (2009): 26.

role in *guiding* behavior. As Sageman writes, the global jihadi movement is driven by a ‘Salafi ideology [that] determines its mission, sets its goals, and guides its tactics.’³²¹ A group’s ideology can therefore provide important clues to its stance on the use of political violence, detailing perceived enemies and allies, clarifying the goals being strived for and, crucially, the conditions under which the use of violence is seen as legitimate. Examining a terrorist or extremist group’s ideology is therefore a key aspect of reaching a more accurate understanding of its nature.

The Hofstadgroup is commonly designated a ‘Salafi’, ‘jihadist’ or ‘Salafi-Jihadist’ group.³²² Salafi-Jihadists form the militant branch of the heterogeneous and international Salafist movement. Its devotees share a desire to return to a ‘pure’ Islam as practiced by the faith’s earliest adherents (the Salafs) and place a strong emphasis on a strict and literalistic adherence to the precepts found in the Quran and the examples set by the Prophet Muhammad.³²³ Contemporary Salafists also share a stringent form of monotheism that stresses the concept of ‘tawhid’, or the oneness of god and his exclusive right to be worshiped as the sole creator and lawmaker in the universe. As such, secular laws and institutions are rejected as idolatry in the sense that they violate tawhid by worshiping the man-made instead of the divinely-inspired.³²⁴

Reflecting the multiple perspectives from which Islamist thinkers throughout history have looked to the Salafs for guidance on worldly problems, several key distinctions can still be drawn in today’s Salafist movement. These distinctions stem not so much from key principles or the goals being pursued, but from disagreements on how to achieve them. Wiktorowicz has popularized a three-fold division of the Salafist movement into ‘politicos’ who strive to achieve their theocratic ideals through political participation, ‘purists’ who eschew politics in favor of proselytization and religious education and ‘jihadists’ who believe revolutionary violence is necessary to bring about change and safeguard a community of believers beleaguered by apostasy, heresy and the aggressive geopolitics of unbelievers such as the United States.³²⁵

Although their ultimate goal is to bring about change in Muslim lands, prominent Salafi-Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda have internationalized their struggle. This development is at least partly based on the idea that the ‘near enemy’ of corrupt, un-Islamic Middle Eastern regimes cannot be toppled until the ‘far enemy’ of Western governments that support them, and which have invaded Muslim states, have been forced to withdraw their influence and presence from the

321 Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1.

322 Romain Bartolo, “Decentralised leadership in contemporary jihadism: towards a global social movement,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 2, no. 1 (2011): 51; Nesser, “Lessons learned,” 3; Nesser, “Chronology of jihadism in Western Europe,” 936; Noivo, “Jihadism in Portugal,” 6; Marc Sageman, “Confronting al-Qaeda: understanding the threat in Afghanistan,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 4 (2009): 5; Silber and Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West,” 16; Vidino, “The Hofstad group,” 587; Lorenzo Vidino, “Radicalization, linkage, and diversity: current trends in terrorism in Europe,” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), 4.

323 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207, 209.

324 Ibid., 207-210; Peters, “Dutch extremist Islamism,” 151.

325 Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi movement,” 207-239.

Islamic regions of the world.³²⁶ As such, Salafi-Jihadist ideology provides a justification for the use of political violence against Western targets based on a fusion of geopolitical and religious motives. A second ideological justification for violence that is important for understanding the Hofstadgroup revolves around the practice of ‘takfir’, or excommunication. Because apostasy is a grave offense within Islam, denouncing Muslims as unbelievers is a powerful theological weapon that legitimizes the use of violence against rulers and people who are ostensibly co-religionists.³²⁷

It should be pointed out that Salafi-Jihadists are themselves not a homogeneous group. Important differences in terms of strategy and principle remain. For instance, although al-Qaeda eventually focused its efforts on fighting the ‘far enemy’ epitomized by the United States, the organization was initially hamstrung by internal discord over this matter. Another important distinction to keep in mind for the discussion of the Hofstadgroup’s ideology is that although the principle of takfir is recognized by a broad range of radical and extremist groups, they differ in their interpretation of when the criteria for excommunication are met.³²⁸ As the following paragraphs illustrate, many of the divisions within the contemporary Salafist movement, and discussions over the legitimate use of takfir, were mirrored among the Hofstadgroup’s participants.

4.3.1 The Hofstadgroup’s ideology

Shared religious beliefs were the most important factor binding Hofstadgroup participants together.³²⁹ In a general sense, the entire group can be positioned within the broad Salafist revivalist movement. This is evidenced first and foremost by the primacy attached to a strict interpretation of tawhid and the related necessity to reject all secular governments and institutions. These themes appear to have been the most frequent subjects of group meetings, and the essence of the teachings of Abu Khaled, the middle-aged Syrian man who provided the group with religious instruction.³³⁰ Equally revealing, one interviewee declared that the first question asked of newcomers was ‘do you know what tawhid means?’³³¹ Many participants possessed (parts of) a large digital ‘library’ containing a wide range of works by Islamic scholars, jurists and theologians

326 Steven Brooke, “Jihadist strategic debates before 9/11,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (2008): 212-218; Turner, “From cottage industry to international organisation,” 544-545.

327 Jeffrey B. Cozzens, “Al-Takfir wa’l Hijra: unpacking an enigma,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 500-501, 503; Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi movement,” 229-230.

328 Cozzens, “Al-Takfir wa’l Hijra,” 500-501, 503; Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi movement,” 228-234.

329 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 1,” (Amsterdam2012), 2; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 2; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, “Personal interview 2,” 1; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, “Personal interview 1,” (Nieuwegein2015), 2.

330 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/13: 136-140; 101/117: 4002, 4026, 4048-4050, 4090-4091, 4096, 4098, 4129, 4179, 4146, 4201; AHB4002/4026: 3796-3803; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 1,” 2-3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 2,” (Amsterdam2012), 8-9; Samir A[.], “Deurwaarders,” (2004), 24; Erkel, *Samir*, 190-192; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 140, 194.

331 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 2.

representing various strands of Salafist thinking.³³² These ranged from the influential 13th century jurist and Salafist scholar Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya to more contemporary and politicized scholars such as Sayyid Qutb, an erstwhile militant leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

Surprisingly, however, the Hofstadgroup's participants were largely but not exclusively drawn to the Salafi-Jihadist strand of thinking.³³³ For instance, two persons with misgivings about the ideas espoused by the more extreme elements within the group asked a Dutch Salafist imam loyal to the Saudi-Arabian regime for advice, thereby displaying an allegiance to such religious authority reminiscent of 'purist' sensibilities.³³⁴ Two others candidly declared during police questioning that they supported the introduction of Islamic law, but only if a majority of people in the Netherlands voted for it, thus hinting at opinions more in line with politicians than jihadists.³³⁵ Another three seem to have had little interest in radical or fundamentalist interpretations of Islam altogether.³³⁶

Within the confines of a largely Salafist interpretation of Islam, there appears to have been a surprising degree of tolerance for differing opinions. It appears that this was due in part to a sense among the more extremist participants that newcomers could not be expected to immediately embrace 'true' Islam.³³⁷ Once someone was considered a true brother or sister in the Hofstadgroup's extremist views on Islam, dissension was treated less with indifference than with verbal outrage.³³⁸ Still, the lack of a singular and exclusively extremist 'Hofstadgroup ideology' is striking.

The above findings add a degree of nuance to discussions about the beliefs of the Hofstadgroup's participants. But they should not detract from the overarching conclusion that most of the group's participants displayed an affinity with an extremist Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam. This can be gleaned from their possession of documents, videos and audio recordings which emphasized the legitimacy and necessity of waging armed jihad and their adoration of key figures in the jihadist movement such as Bin Laden and the deceased leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.³³⁹

332 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 47; NCTV Employee 1, "Personal interview 2," (The Hague 2012), 2; Eline Wubbels, "Mohammed B. strijdt verder," <http://www.kennislink.nl/publicaties/mohammed-b-strijdt-verder>.

333 Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 128-129, 183.

334 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," GET: 4018-4020, 4129, 4132, 4146, 4148, 4159; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 98-99.

335 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 20083, 20567.

336 Ibid., VERD: 19477-19478, 19480, 19597, 19654, 20522, 20535, 20566; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 2, "Personal interview 1," (The Hague 2012), 2-4, 6-7.

337 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 1; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 3.

338 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 3.

339 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 131, 134, 142-147, 160-161, 171-172; 101/113: 147; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 6; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 21, 33; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 9; A[.], "Deurwaarders," 7.

Although a large segment of the Hofstadgroup subscribed to an ideology that legitimizes and even calls for the use of violence against Western states and impious Muslims, this did not immediately translate into a desire to commit terrorism. Initially, the group's most militant participants took from Salafi-Jihadism the understanding that jihad was a personal duty, yet saw it as a *defensive* form of warfare against foreign aggressors. In 2003 this led four participants to attempt to reach conflict zones in Chechnya and Pakistan / Afghanistan.³⁴⁰ There is little to suggest that these trips were made to prepare for a terrorist attack in the Netherlands. Instead, the available data, such as a farewell letter left by one of them, indicates they intended to stay with the insurgents.³⁴¹ Essentially, for the main part of 2003, core participants in the Hofstadgroup were would-be foreign fighters, but not yet would-be terrorists.³⁴²

Towards the fall of 2003, the group's most militant participants increasingly began to see jihad as something that could be waged *offensively* as well. Two developments were central to this change. In October 2003, the Dutch police arrested several participants and found one of them in possession of materials indicating an interest in constructing an improvised explosive device.³⁴³ Based on an unfinished autobiography written while in custody and a martyr's video recorded in 2005, this individual came to justify violence against the Netherlands for its (military) support of the United States and what he saw as unwarranted aggression against Muslim countries.³⁴⁴ Numerous other participants developed a strong sense of antipathy towards the Dutch government for similar reasons.³⁴⁵ One interviewee explicitly named the Dutch military presence in Iraq as contributing to changing the group's focus from participation in the international jihad to using violence in the Netherlands.³⁴⁶ Catalyzing this shift was 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid. To the group's most militant participants, the bombing showed that terrorism in Europe was both possible and permitted.³⁴⁷

Late 2003 also saw the group's extremist inner circle begin to consider terrorism in the Netherlands for religious reasons. During the fall, one individual jubilantly chatted online about slaughtering 'all those fake Muslims' and in a later conversation claimed that Dutch Member of Parliament

340 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 33; 01/13: 140-143; GET: 18061-18062, 18840, 18452; A[.], "Deurwaarders," 10-19; Sageman, "Hofstad case," 83, 86-87, 97.

341 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 163; AHD108/137: 8571, 8767; AHD8509/8538: 9055-9056; A[.], "Deurwaarders," 10-11; De Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen*, 258-259; Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 349.

342 Making them similar to other jihadist extremists in the Netherlands. See: Jasper L. De Bie, Christianne J. De Poot, and Joanne P. Van der Leun, "Shifting modus operandi of jihadist foreign fighters from the Netherlands between 2000 and 2013: a crime script analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 422-435.

343 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 25-26.

344 A[.], "Deurwaarders," 4-5, 9; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA," NOVA, <http://www.novatv.nl/page/detail/nieuws/8887/Videotestament+Samir+A.+vertaling+NOVA>.

345 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 131; 101/113: 161; 101/117: 4069; AHA4005/4022: 2228; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," Appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 32-34.

346 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 23.

347 Ibid., 22; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 5.

Geert Wilders, known for his strong criticism of Islam, should be killed for insulting Islam.³⁴⁸ Another condemned ‘90 percent of the mujahedeen in Chechnya’ as apostates.³⁴⁹ At this time, however, other participants including Abu Khaled who led many gatherings still advocated a modicum of restraint in wielding takfir as a theological weapon.³⁵⁰ Based on participants’ accounts, it seems that the use of takfir became increasingly indiscriminate from 2004 onward, leading to internal disagreements, and causing several participants to distance themselves from the group.³⁵¹ According to one former participant, judging whether other Muslims’ actions and words were grounds for excommunication was an almost everyday practice.³⁵²

Some participants went so far as to excommunicate virtually everyone who was not a part of their group; one allegedly even ‘did takfir’ on Bin Laden while others excommunicated each other.³⁵³ The extremes to which some took takfir problematizes the extent to which these individuals can be considered as falling within the Salafi-Jihadist ideological current. While a broad range of Islamist groups wield takfir, they usually use it to delegitimize Muslim governments in order to justify violent resistance.³⁵⁴ Excommunicating vast swathes of Muslims appears to be more in line with extremist sects such as Egypt’s now defunct Takfir wal Hijra.³⁵⁵ There are no signs that (elements of) the Hofstadgroup ever claimed to be successors to this extremist offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, some former participants did refer to the Hofstadgroup’s most avid excommunicators as ‘takfiris’, and one interviewee classified the group as ‘sect like’.³⁵⁶ Like the Salafists and jihadist that inspired it, the Hofstadgroup was clearly not an ideologically homogeneous entity, but one in which various currents of thought were reflected.

Crucial in sustaining and strengthening this trend towards a greater emphasis on religious justifications for violence, was the to-be murderer of Van Gogh. In July 2004, he translated a section of Ibn Taymiyya’s work which postulates that it is a Muslim’s duty to kill anyone who insults the Prophet Muhammad.³⁵⁷ This led the assassin to believe it was his personal duty to commit violence in defense of his faith. Although the murderer was the only one to act on his beliefs, his ideas on religiously justified violence were shared by at least the group’s inner circle. Several other participants made explicit statements in favor of murdering Ayaan Hirsi Ali,

348 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/01: 125; AHD109/138: 9077; Jaco Alberts and Steven Derix, “Balkenende in 2003 al op dodenlijst Jason W.,” *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 January 2005.

349 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” AHD08/37: 8550.

350 Ibid., AHA05/22: 2167-2168; AHA2109/2126: 3799-3803; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, “Personal interview 1,” (The Hague2014), 1.

351 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/17: 4002-4003, 4018-4020, 4030, 4048-4058, 4062, 4085-4086, 4092, 4100, 4125-4127, 4129, 4204; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, “Personal interview 1,” 1; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 36-37, 93.

352 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 2-3.

353 Ibid., 3; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 166, 181.

354 Cozzens, “Al-Takfir wa’l Hijra,” 497, 500-501.

355 Ibid., 489-510.

356 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/17: 4002-4204; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 3.

357 Peters, “Dutch extremist Islamism,” 155-156; Public Prosecutor 1, “Personal interview 1,” 11.

especially after the short Islam-critical film she had made with Van Gogh, *Submission, part 1*, was broadcast at the end of August 2004.³⁵⁸ Likewise, sources also suggest tacit and even outspoken support for the killing of Van Gogh on religious grounds. One inner circle participant openly told the police that Van Gogh deserved to be executed for his offenses to Islam.³⁵⁹

Given these developments, it is interesting to note that the participants in 2005's 'Piranha' resurgence of the Hofstadgroup appear to have reverted to predominantly geopolitical motives as justification for terrorist attacks in the Netherlands. Not only did the police find evidence that the suspects had been gathering information on the addresses of several Dutch politicians, most of whom did not have an outspokenly 'anti-Islam' profile, but in a martyr's video one of the ringleaders strongly condemned the Dutch government for its involvement in the Iraq war and threatens violence against the Dutch people for their complicity in this endeavor.³⁶⁰ These fluctuations in the justifications for violence, from an emphasis on geopolitics in 2003, to religious motives in 2004 and back to geopolitics in 2005, indicate just how difficult it is to speak of a clearly defined or commonly shared 'Hofstadgroup ideology'.

Like the militants and scholars who inspired them, the group's most extremist participants held differing and changing views on the form jihad was to take. While some were narrowly motivated to punish blasphemers, others were inspired by geopolitical events to defend the Muslim ummah; while some practiced takfir without restraint, others acknowledged at least some boundaries. While in 2003 militant participants saw jihad in a defensive light and sought to aid overseas Islamist insurgents in their fight against foreign aggressors, an 'offensive' interpretation of jihad that legitimized violence in the Netherlands began to take hold from late 2003 onward. Furthermore, while most participants adhered to the Salafi-Jihadist current, a minority more closely resembled its political and purist strands of thought.

These conclusions are important not just because they infuse some nuance into the debate about the group's nature. The relative 'tolerance' for views not completely in line with Salafist-Jihadist principles, the sect-like elements that took the excommunication of Muslims to extremes, and the different opinions on how to implement jihad meant that the Hofstadgroup remained an ideologically somewhat ambiguous entity. As a result, there was never a concrete blueprint for what the group hoped to achieve, no clear plan of action that could form the basis for communal efforts. This relative diversity of ideological views also contributed to ambiguity in an organizational sense, as at least initially it appears that essentially anyone who subscribed to basic Salafist principles could participate. Ideologically, the Hofstadgroup was largely but never *exclusively* wedded to views that supported the use of terrorist violence.

358 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 74, 161-162.

359 Ibid., VERD: 20462; Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 21; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 41.

360 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 34-35; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A.," Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, "Samir A. in afgesplitste terreurgroep," *De Volkskrant*, 28 January 2006.

4.4 Defining terrorist organizations

The Hofstadgroup's organizational characteristics are assessed using three contrasting perspectives found in the literature on terrorism. The first is Crenshaw's view of terrorist groups as *organizations* characterized by a defined structure, a systematic decision making process, clearly defined roles and tasks for members, recognized leadership and authority and, lastly, the collective pursuit of clearly defined organizational goals.³⁶¹ Second, there is Sageman's concept of contemporary jihadist groups as ambiguously defined *networks*.³⁶² One of the few specific definitions of a jihadist network is given by the Dutch intelligence service AIVD, who describe it as a 'fluid, dynamic, vaguely delineated structure comprising a number of interrelated persons (radical Muslims) who are linked both individually and on an aggregate level (cells/groups). They have at least a temporary common interest, i.e. the pursuit of a jihadism-related goal (including terrorism).'³⁶³ Finally, Ligon et al. describe *groups* as social arrangements that lack shared efforts directed at attaining a commonly held goal.³⁶⁴

4.4.1 The Hofstadgroup's organizational structure

Evidence for a defined organizational structure is almost entirely absent in the case of the Hofstadgroup until its second incarnation in early 2005. To begin with, many participants have categorically denied the existence of any kind of formal group or organization.³⁶⁵ Furthermore, no 'official' list of participants was ever encountered and there does not appear to have been an initiation process for aspirants nor any other sort of semi-formal mechanism for distinguishing between those within the group and those outside of it.³⁶⁶ Instead, the Hofstadgroup resembled an amorphous community of like-minded individuals spread over several nearby cities.³⁶⁷ It was not truly one group but a collection of smaller subgroups, principally revolving around one a nucleus in The Hague and one in Amsterdam.³⁶⁸ As a result of this lack of centralization, not all participants knew each other.³⁶⁹ The spread-out nature of the group further underlines the ambiguity of its organizational structure.

361 Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 69.

362 Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, 140-143.

363 General Intelligence and Security Service, "Violent jihad in the Netherlands," 14.

364 Gina Scott Ligon et al., "Putting the 'O' in VEOs: what makes an organization?," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 6, no. 1-3 (2013): 120.

365 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19476-19477, 19866, 19918, 20005, 20017, 20080, 20228, 20363; GET: 18415; 19401/19417: 14099-14100; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 3-4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 14-15.

366 Although one participant did drink the breast milk of the Syrian preacher's wife, this seemingly ritualistic act of bonding was not performed by others within the group and appears to have affirmed a private bond of friendship bordering on kinship rather than a pledge of allegiance. Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19744-19745; Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 345.

367 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 3-4; Van der Hulst, "Terroristische netwerken," 8-27.

368 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 1.

369 Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 164; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 1," 1.

There is even considerable confusion over whether a commonly accepted name for the group existed. Some publications, videos and websites related to Hofstadgroup began to feature a logo bearing the titles ‘Lions of Tawheed’ and ‘Polder Mujahideen’³⁷⁰ from early 2004 onward. Yet there are contradictory accounts regarding the degree to which these monikers were used by the wider group.³⁷¹ While one witness recalled hearing one or two individuals referring to themselves as ‘Lions of Tawheed’, an interviewee mentioned that this term was used largely in jest.³⁷² Another former participant did identify himself as a ‘Lion of Tawheed’ but implied that it was not so much a specific group name as a broader term used to express one’s adherence to this core tenet of Salafist Islam.³⁷³ The name ‘Lions of Tawheed’ seemed to play a more prominent role during 2005’s Hofstadgroup resurgence, where it turns up in association with numerous publications and videos produced and promulgated by one of the core participants.³⁷⁴ It remains unclear, however, whether the other participants in the Piranha group designated themselves as such.

In the wake of Van Gogh’s murder, two individuals within the extremist inner circle were overheard identifying themselves with the murderer and using the name the ‘Brigades of the Islamic Jihad’.³⁷⁵ Like the ‘Lions of Tawheed’ designation, it remains unclear whether this truly reflected a commonly-used group name or merely individual braggadocio. Based on the currently available data, it seems likely that these examples reflect the shared kinship of the group’s extremist inner circle and indicate some early and ad hoc attempts at forging a stronger collective identity among them. It is unlikely, however, that these designations reflected the existence of a tangible group structure or that they encompassed the wider Hofstadgroup.

The Hofstadgroup lacked true leadership or even a rudimentary hierarchical structure for the better part of its existence.³⁷⁶ But it did have individuals who stood higher on the social pecking order through, for example, their greater command of Arabic. Van Gogh’s murderer was esteemed for his knowledge of Islam, yet he does not appear to have occupied a leadership position and is frequently referred to as a rather quiet and withdrawn individual.³⁷⁷ The person who most closely resembled the group’s leader was Abu Khaled, the middle-aged Syrian man mentioned earlier. His role as a religious instructor gave him a prominent and well-respected

370 A ‘polder’ is a characteristic feature of the Dutch landscape.

371 The logo may not even have been made by a participant: Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, “Personal interview 2,” 1.

372 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” 01/17: 4099; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 5.

373 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 2,” 17.

374 Meijer, “Inhoud van de religieuze en ideologische documenten aangetroffen in het beslag van verdachten in het Piranha-onderzoek,” 29-30.

375 Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” AHA07/24: 3082; Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 353-354.

376 Public Prosecutor 1, “Personal interview 1,” 51; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 2,” 31-32; Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” VERD: 19479, 19876.

377 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, “Personal interview 1,” 4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, “Personal interview 2,” 13; NCTV Employee 1, “Personal interview 2,” 2; Dienst Nationale Recherche, “RL8026,” VERD: 19868, 20212, 20227; Vidino, “The Hofstad group,” 586-587; Public Prosecutor 2, “Personal interview 1,” 4.

position within the group and a good deal of authority.³⁷⁸ At the same time, there is little to suggest his influence extended beyond providing religious instruction; there are no concrete signs that he took a leadership position in the sense of shaping the Hofstadgroup organizationally or setting out operational goals.³⁷⁹ Two former participants labeled the Syrian as an important source of religious knowledge and a good teacher, but not a leader or even a particularly inspiring individual.³⁸⁰

The conclusion that the Hofstadgroup lacked clear leadership needs to be qualified somewhat when looking at 2005's Piranha case. This 'second wave' of the group brought with it tentative signs of a burgeoning hierarchy. Most notably, two individuals who had belonged to the 'original' Hofstadgroup's inner circle began to direct the activities of some other group participants, for instance by them rent an apartment in Brussels that was used to hold meetings.³⁸¹ Additionally, there were signs that these two ringleaders provided direction to group participants on matters related to the planning of as many as three tentative terrorist plots.³⁸² The Piranha group never developed a formal hierarchy, but these developments indicate it might have been headed in that direction had arrests in June and October 2005 not put an end to the group.

Two other attributes of terrorist *organizations*, a systematic decision making process and the distribution of clearly defined organizational roles and tasks, were also largely absent. For the most part, the group did little beyond hold frequent meetings where they discussed their religion or simply chatted and relaxed.³⁸³ Whatever activities were undertaken were initiated on an ad hoc basis by individuals or by small groups of two or three, such as the attempts to reach foreign conflict zones during 2003.³⁸⁴ There is little to indicate that these attempts were the result of a collectively made decision. Perhaps the strongest reference to a decision making process stems from one of the letters left by Van Gogh's murderer, in which he advises the group to discuss whether or not to publish a pamphlet in which he threatens the Dutch people.³⁸⁵ Examples of a distribution of tasks and roles are similarly weak and limited to the joint administration of at least one website and one participant's avowedly self-appointed task of publishing online anything written by Van Gogh's to-be assassin.³⁸⁶

No data was encountered to suggest that participants in the 2005 Piranha case had developed a systematic decision making process. There were, however, some indications that tasks relevant

378 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19480, 19705-19706, 19747; 19401/19417: 14095.

379 NCTV Employee 1, "Personal interview 1," 2; Public Prosecutor 1, "Personal interview 1," 8.

380 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 33; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 4.

381 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 63, 187, 11782-11785.

382 Ibid., 34-35, 8357-8359, 8382-8383, 8388, 8390-8391; Vidino, "The Hofstad group," 584.

383 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 5; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 3," (Amsterdam2012), 2.

384 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 140-143; Erkel, *Samir*, 194-197.

385 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHB03/27: 4043.

386 Ibid., AHA04/21: 1324-1343; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 32.

to the preparation of the three terrorist plots under consideration were distributed among participants. For instance, one participant was used as a courier, fetching a package containing information on potential targets for an attack from one of the group's ringleaders and bringing it to the other.³⁸⁷ Likewise, the Islamic wife of one of these main protagonists actively tried to gather information on the addresses of several Dutch politicians.³⁸⁸ Once again it should be stressed that these signs of a division of tasks were distinctly tentative. Even so, they do mark a change from the 'first wave' Hofstadgroup that again underscores the Piranha group's development towards a slightly more organizationally defined entity.

To summarize, until the Hofstadgroup's resurgence during 2005's Piranha case, it appears to have lacked virtually all of the characteristics of a terrorist organization as defined by Crenshaw. Its boundaries were vague and ambiguous and there was no hierarchy to speak of. Neither does the available data allow for the existence of a decision making process or anything but the most basic division of tasks. While some of these organizational aspects became noticeably more pronounced in 2005, this development fell well short of qualifying the Hofstadgroup as an actual organization. The very absence of clear organizational aspects points instead towards the greater applicability of viewing the Hofstadgroup as a jihadist network. But the accuracy of this qualification revolves around the existence of one crucial element from the AIVD's definition of a jihadist network that has not yet been discussed in detail; namely, a common effort directed towards preparing an act of terrorism.

4.5 Group involvement in terrorism?

From the fall of 2003 until the final wave of arrests in October 2005, the available evidence suggests that several participants considered committing acts of terrorism in the Netherlands. One of them carried out his intentions and murdered Van Gogh, whereas the other alleged plots did not advance beyond rudimentary planning stages. For the 'network' label to be applicable to the Hofstadgroup, these plots and the murder of Van Gogh need to have represented a communal effort. The crux of the matter is, however, that the only actual terrorist attack that took place appears to have been the work of an individual and that the majority of all the other potential or alleged attempts to plan an attack were likewise solo-projects. Clear *group* involvement in terrorism was almost entirely absent until 2005's Piranha case.

For instance, the house searches of October 2003 and June 2004 both uncovered materials indicative of an interest in constructing an explosive device, but on both occasions those items belonged to one individual.³⁸⁹ Although two other participants had made inquiries about fertilizer in a garden store in June 2004 as well, it is unclear whether this was a related development.³⁹⁰ In

387 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 61.

388 Ibid., 36, 40-64, 156-162.

389 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 38-45.

390 Ibid., 01/01: 40; 01/13: 175.

any case, the police did not uncover evidence to substantiate a suspicion that the wider group was involved with the arrested individual's attempts at constructing a bomb. This was the same person who, also by himself, carried out the potential reconnaissance of the AIVD headquarters in June 2004.³⁹¹ Similarly, as the chronological overview of events described in more detail, the police investigation failed to uncover any *concrete* evidence to support a conclusion other than that the murder of Van Gogh was planned, prepared and executed by a single person.³⁹²

The hand grenade thrown at police officers in November 2004 was a premeditated act of violence. The two Hofstadgroup participants who occupied the apartment that was stormed by the police had discussed beforehand that they would use the weapon to resist arrest.³⁹³ But as an essentially defensive measure, the intended effect of the violent act was limited to keeping the police at bay. It was not meant as a means of communicating with audiences beyond the direct targets of that violence and can therefore not be classified as an act of terrorism. As such, this incident is not used to evaluate whether the Hofstadgroup was communally involved in (preparing) acts of terrorism.

In April 2005, the individual who had been found in possession of materials indicating an interest in constructing an explosive device was released from custody. Together with another extremist participant of the Hofstadgroup who had evaded capture following Van Gogh's murder, he tried to breathe new life into what was left of the Hofstadgroup. With the assistance of several other individuals who had been on the fringes of the Hofstadgroup during 2004, as many as three rudimentary plots appear to have been considered. The first, which came to the police's attention in June, revolved around attacking specific politicians. The second potential plot came to the fore in August and centered on shooting down an El-Al plane at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. In October 2005 the police received information indicating the possible existence of a third plot aimed at striking the AIVD headquarters. It was the brainchild of the remaining key player within the group, the same individual who was suspected of plotting a terrorist attack in October 2003 and June 2004.³⁹⁴

None of these plots appear to have developed beyond basic planning and preparatory stages and the alleged plan to attack an El-Al plane using an RPG comes across as distinctly fanciful. Given the controversial use of intelligence information as the evidentiary basis for these terrorist conspiracies, care must be taken not to accept their existence as simple facts.³⁹⁵ Nevertheless, while during 2003 and 2004 such plots as there were and the attack on Van Gogh remained predominantly the work of individuals, the revitalization of the Hofstadgroup during 2005's

391 Ibid., 01/01: 38-45.

392 Van Straelen, "Requisitoir in de strafzaak tegen Mohammed B.," 6-7.

393 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHA07/24: 3034, 3047.

394 Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 40-41, 44, 49, 51-53, 60, 158, 1056, 6386, 7273, 7278, 8326, 11404.

395 Quirine Eijkman and Bibi Van Ginkel, "Compatible or incompatible? Intelligence and human rights in terrorist trials," *Amsterdam Law Forum* 3, no. 4 (2011); "Hoge Raad vernietigt veroordeling Soumaya S.," *De Volkskrant*, 15 November 2011.

Piranha case produced the first tentative signs that terrorist aims were being developed communally. This marks 2005 as the first time that the Hofstadgroup clearly *began* to resemble a jihadist terrorist network.

Given the necessary time and freedom of operation, it is likely that the Hofstadgroup would have developed into a more clearly defined terrorist network. One former participant opined that there was within the group a clear trend towards the communal use of violence.³⁹⁶ However, there is a risk in attaching too much importance to such statements and succumbing to ‘what if’ history. Given the tentative nature of the signs toward communal involvement in terrorism, and the fact that they did not manifest themselves until late in the group’s lifespan, the Hofstadgroup’s organizational nature is best captured by Ligon et al.’s use of the term ‘group’, which expressly omits the communal focus on the achievement of a shared goal.³⁹⁷ Consequently, the Hofstadgroup is deliberately labeled as a group throughout this thesis.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined to what degree the ‘homegrown’, ‘jihadist’, ‘network’ and ‘terrorist’ descriptors commonly ascribed to the Hofstadgroup were accurate reflections of its nature. The results suggest the need for a nuanced perspective on all these elements, undercutting claims that the group was a ‘quintessential’ example of this typology of terrorism.³⁹⁸ Instead, it was in many ways an ambiguous entity; not entirely homegrown, not exclusively Salafi-Jihadist in ideological orientation, neither clearly a network nor an organization but more accurately described as a ‘group’, and largely lacking signs of communal involvement in terrorism until its 2005 ‘Piranha’ resurgence.

Nevertheless, some contours can be drawn. Throughout its existence, the group resembled a set of concentric circles. At its core was a relatively small number of participants who married Salafi-Jihadist beliefs to the conviction that jihad was a personal duty. Surrounding them was a larger group of individuals who shared an interpretation of Islam largely in line with Salafi-Jihadist beliefs but who showed no real interest (yet) in becoming involved in acts of violence. A much smaller third group of participants adhered to Salafist principles but did not see the use of violence as legitimate. Finally, there was a very small minority of individuals who appear to have had very little interest in fundamentalist, radical or extremist interpretations of Islam altogether.

A second important conclusion is that the Hofstadgroup was never static but undergoing a continuous process of ideological and organizational development. Although the group had very few identifiable organizational characteristics between 2002 and 2004, it began to develop a rudimentary hierarchy and division of tasks in 2005. Crucially, the Hofstadgroup

396 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, “Personal interview 2,” 4-5.

397 Ligon et al., “Putting the ‘O’ in VEOs,” 120.

398 Vidino, “Radicalization, linkage, and diversity,” 4.

was in an ideological sense not always and never entirely a terrorist group. In 2003, it most militant participants wanted to become foreign fighters, not terrorists conducting attacks in the Netherlands. That changed from late 2003 onward, as several began to show a clear interest in carrying out acts of violence at home.

Although the group showed clearer signs of communal involvement in terrorism from 2005 onward, it always contained participants who did not fully, or even not all, share the inner-circle's beliefs in the legitimacy and *personal necessity* of engaging in this form of political violence. These nuances make it difficult to close this chapter with a single, clear response to the question of what the Hofstadgroup was. On the one hand its extremist and militant inner-circle made it a terrorist network under construction. On the other, for most of its participants the Hofstadgroup was a venue to meet like-minded individuals and a place where both world affairs and religion were discussed from a point of view that was always fundamentalist, often radical but not necessarily violent.