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

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Cover Page

6. Group dynamics I: Initiating and sustaining involvement

6.1 Introduction

Terrorism is predominantly a group phenomenon.[538] This draws attention to the second part of the multilevel analytical framework outlined in chapter 2; namely, the role of group dynamics. How do terrorist groups influence the worldview and behavior of their participants? In this first of two chapters on group dynamics and involvement in terrorism, the focus is on the group processes that draw and bind people to terrorist groups. Seven group-level hypotheses are analyzed and applied to the data on the Hofstadgroup to understand the role of group dynamics in bringing about participation and how they influenced participants' adoption of radical and extremist beliefs. The second chapter on group dynamics discusses their influence on the commission of actual acts of terrorism.

6.1.1 Group dynamics and involvement in terrorism

For decades, group dynamics have attracted considerable attention from terrorism researchers.[539] In recent years, this level of analysis has been described as of above average explanatory potential when it comes to understanding involvement. Kleinmann, for instance, found that '[g]roup-level processes are the most significant mechanism for radicalization of both convert and non-convert homegrown Sunni militants in the United States.'[540] In *Leaderless jihad*, Marc Sageman argues that both micro and macro perspectives on terrorism are limited in their ability to offer an understanding of terrorism and that a middle-ground analysis is needed, one in which ample attention is paid to the *relationships between terrorists*, such as leader-follower interactions.[541] A first step towards assessing whether group dynamics can also offer useful insights into how involvement in the Hofstadgroup came about, is inventorying relevant group-level explanations.

Several authors have conducted literature reviews of group-level explanations for terrorism.[542] These provide useful overviews of the most prevalent hypotheses, but generally do not organize them according to a particular logic. There is no equivalent to Crenshaw's division of the structural-level causes of terrorism into preconditions and precipitants that can be used

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538   Nesser, "Toward an increasingly heterogeneous threat," 440, 450; Ramón Spaaij, "The enigma of lone wolf terrorism: an assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 859.

539   Della Porta, "Recruitment processes," 307-316; McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 331-346.

540   Kleinmann, "Radicalization of homegrown Sunni militants in the United States," 288.

541   Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, 23-24.

542   Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I," 7-36; LaFree and Ackerman, "The empirical study of terrorism," 355-360; Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist radicalisation*, 39-51.

to organize the discussion of the group level of analysis.[543] However, one of the assumptions underlying this research is that involvement in terrorism is the end result of a process in which multiple factors exert an influence. This draws attention to work by Taylor and Horgan, who apply criminological research to the study of terrorism to distinguish *involvement decisions* from *event decisions*, essentially arguing that the processes by which people become involved in terrorist groups are distinct from those that lead some group members to participate in actual attacks.[544] Joining a terrorist group does not mean that the participant will also become involved in actual violence.

Following Taylor and Horgan's argument, the group level of analysis has been divided into two parts. The first deals with group processes that influence how and why people join and stay in extremist or terrorist groups. The second focuses on group dynamics that influence the commission of concrete acts of terrorism. Because the literature on both of these subjects is extensive, each is discussed in a separate chapter. The current chapter focuses on the contribution made by group-level factors to bringing about and sustaining involvement in terrorism. A review of the literature on terrorism revealed eight group-level explanations other researchers have thought relevant to this discussion (Table 7). Only one hypothesis could be dismissed out of hand. The literature indicates broad consensus that 'brainwashing', the idea that people can be coerced to adopt ideas, does not constitute a credible, empirically substantiated hypothesis.[545] Despite being an explanation encountered with some frequency in journalistic accounts of involvement in terrorism, it is not given further consideration here.[546]

Initiating and sustaining involvement in terrorist groups
Terrorist group formation
Social identity and the benefits of group membership
Socialization into a worldview conducive to terrorism
The underground life
Social learning theory
The influence of leaders
Peer pressures
~~Brainwashing~~

Table 7

543   Crenshaw, "The causes of terrorism," 381.
544   Taylor and Horgan, "A conceptual framework," 592; Horgan, *Walking away from terrorism*, 13, 142-146; Taylor, "Is terrorism a group phenomenon?," 125-126.
545   Lorne L. Dawson, "The study of new religious movements and the radicalization of home-grown terrorists: opening a dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2009): 3; David C. Hofmann and Lorne L. Dawson, "The neglected role of charismatic authority in the study of terrorist groups and radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 4 (2014): 351, 360; Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, 124-125.
546   Steven Derix, "Volgelingen Syriër 'opgefokt en gehersenspoeld'," *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 April 2005; Casper Van der Veen, "Kijken: 10 jaar na de aanslagen van 7/7 in Londen kijken overlevenden terug," *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 July 2015.

6.2 Terrorist group formation

Terrorist group formation is generally seen as either a top-down or a bottom-up process. The first revolves around premeditated attempts by recruiters to encourage or coax others into joining an established terrorist organization.[547] Blazak, for instance, has found that such activities are prevalent among American Nazi skinheads.[548] Bottom-up group formation is a much more autonomous process, whereby like-minded individuals come together without the intervention of recruiters linked to established terrorist organizations.[549] Autonomous group formation is not random, however. Research shows that participation in radical or extremist groups is guided by pre-existing social ties.[550] People become involved in groups, terrorist or otherwise, to a large extent because family members, friends or acquaintances are already participating who thus provide exposure and easy access to said groups.[551]

The lack of recruiters does not mean that bottom-up processes are necessarily completely volitional. In the context of Italian left-wing extremism, Della Porta found that the desire to obtain the approval of companions already part of clandestine organizations influenced the involvement process of new members.[552] This desire not to be seen remaining on the sidelines exerted a form of peer pressure that propelled non-committed friends towards participation. Similar sentiments, albeit much more strongly expressed, were found among members of Palestinian terrorist groups. As a participant of one such group stated, '[a]nyone who didn't enlist during that period (*intifada*) would have been ostracized'.[553] Even in the absence of conscious efforts at recruitment, terrorist groups can still exert a powerful pull on potential members.

Although the degree of autonomy is at times overstated,[554] various studies indicate that the formation of homegrown jihadist groups is overwhelmingly a bottom-up process.[555] Most homegrown jihadists are 'connected by blood, marriage, and close friendships'.[556] Yet autonomous

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547   Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "Psychological factors in terrorism and counterterrorism: individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 3, no. 1 (2009): 13.
548   Randy Blazak, "White boys to terrorist men: target recruitment of Nazi skinheads," *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 6 (2001): 990-994.
549   Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist radicalisation*, 48-49.
550   Della Porta, "Recruitment processes," 309-310; John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862-875.
551   Ziad W. Munson, *The making of pro-life activists* (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 48-54, 187-189; McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 338.
552   Della Porta, "Recruitment processes," 310.
553   Jerrold Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita Denny, "The terrorists in their own words: interviews with 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 1 (2003): 178.
554   Crone and Harrow, "Homegrown terrorism in the West," 521-524.
555   Bakker, "Characteristics of jihadi terrorists," 142; Bartolo, "Decentralised leadership in contemporary jihadism," 52-54; Olivier Roy, "Al-Qaeda: a true global movement," in *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge: European and American experiences*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Farnham / Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 22-23; Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, 107-120; Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, 66, 109; Vidino, "Radicalization, linkage, and diversity," ix, 3-4.
556   Harris-Hogan, "Australian neo-jihadist terrorism," 311.

group formation should not be taken as an essential characteristic of European homegrown jihadism. Nesser's research on jihadist groups active in Europe between 1995 and 2010 shows a mixture of top-down and autonomous patterns of group formation.[557] The post-2004 rise of autonomously formed groups appears strongly related to intensified domestic and international counterterrorism efforts that seriously hampered the ability of groups like al-Qaeda to operate internationally and made it more difficult for Western citizens to travel to Afghanistan and Iraq.[558] The homegrown nature of entities like the Hofstadgroup may reflect geopolitical realities rather than a consciously chosen organizational format.

6.2.1   The Hofstadgroup's formation

The Hofstadgroup was no exception to the autonomous group formation trend. One interviewee described it as a 'circle of acquaintances'.[559] Many participants had been long-time friends, had grown up together in the same neighborhood, attended the same schools or visited the same mosques. Others met each other in asylum seekers' centers, were colleagues or became acquainted through an internet café they frequented.[560] Those who did not have pre-existing ties to other participants got to know them through introductions by mutual acquaintances,[561] online discussion forums[562] or by being brought along to a group meeting.[563] As far as can be gleaned from the available data, peer pressure does not appear to have propelled involvement. Instead, group formation throughout the Hofstadgroup's existence was driven almost entirely by individuals who came together, volitionally and by chance, through pre-existing social networks.

The Hofstadgroup's largely autonomous formation begs the question whether recruitment played any role at all. The October 2003 attempts by two participants to entice other young Muslims to travel to Pakistan or Afghanistan do not count, as this recruitment effort was not geared towards enlarging the Hofstadgroup itself or forming a separate terrorist cell in the Netherlands. Several group participants did, however, use the Internet to spread their views and engaged in online chat

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557   Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 523-525.

558   Sageman, "Confronting al-Qaeda," 22-24.

559   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 4.

560   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19444, 19459, 19675, 19717, 19858-19860, 19877, 19916, 19980, 19994, 20079, 20112, 20115, 20174; GET: 18215, 18312-18313, 18374-18375, 18414, 20348; 19401/19417: 14176; AHA19403/19420: 11227; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 11520; Van der Hulst, "Terroristische netwerken," 15; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 3; Erkel, *Samir*, 78-79; Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 7, 17-18, 83; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 109-110, 119, 193.

561   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4001, 4004, 4086-4087; AHA4005/4022: 2566; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 313-317, 3756; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 3; Erkel, *Samir*, 186, 257, 261; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 24-25, 123; De Koning, "Changing worldviews and friendship," 385-386.

562   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 7; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 18410; 18401/18417: 14001-14003, 14084, 14124; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 22.

563   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 7-8; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19459, 19465, 19475, 20217; 19401/19417: 14087, 14124, 14178-14179; Erkel, *Samir*, 37-38, 78-79, 186.

conversations with people in the hope of converting them to their point of view.[564] On the whole, however, the evidence suggests that these online outreach activities were principally focused on conveying the 'right' religious views rather than deliberate attempts to form or enlarge an extremist organization. As such, they seem better described as a form of outreach or missionary zeal.

An anecdote that more clearly raises the possibility of recruitment involved one of the middle-aged Syrian men, detailed in chapters 3 and 5, who appeared on the group's edges. An interviewee recalled speaking with this individual at a mosque several times. During those talks, the Syrian man explained that the interviewee's failure to get an internship was due to the 'unbelievers' not granting Muslims anything. Recognizing that he had struck a chord, the Syrian man suggested at a later meeting that the interviewee meet with someone to discuss this topic further and gave him the phone number of a Hofstadgroup participant. Following this suggestion, the interviewee soon found himself in the house of Van Gogh's to-be killer and attending lectures given by Abu Khaled, an acquaintance, moreover, of the Syrian man who suggested the interviewee make contact with the group.[565]

While this series of events is suggestive of recruitment, two factors advocate caution in using this description. First of all, there is no evidence that the first of the two Syrian men mentioned above had a hand in referring other individuals towards the group. This raises the possibility that it was a chance encounter that provided the Syrian man with the opportunity to put like-minded individuals in touch with one another. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that the Hofstadgroup's religious instructor was himself making deliberate efforts to enlarge the group through recruitment. His role appears to have been limited to conveying a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.[566] It is unlikely, therefore, that the two Syrian men were working together as part of a deliberate effort to enlarge the Hofstadgroup.

Recruitment may have played a role in 2005's Piranha case. Two participants claimed in court that they were coerced into providing assistance.[567] However, the truthfulness of these assertions is questionable. Other participants have claimed that the couple, who became key witnesses for the prosecution, presented themselves as helpless victims only to avoid being sentenced.[568] A judge labeled the couple's testimony as 'untrustworthy' for similar reasons.[569] In lieu of more convincing or concrete evidence to the contrary, the conclusion remains that the Hofstadgroup's

564   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4002-4003, 4020, 4026-4031, 4047-4051, 4084-4085, 4128; GET: 18410; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 18-19, 32; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 1-3.
565   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 2-5.
566   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 24; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 2-3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 8-9; 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; Erkel, *Samir*.
567   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 209-214, 218-227.
568   "Getuige Piranha-zaak zelf radicaal."; Kranenberg and Groen, "Kroongetuigen vallen in eigen kuil."
569   Kranenberg and Groen, "Kroongetuigen vallen in eigen kuil."

formation was an overwhelmingly autonomous process. Its participants were not vulnerable youngsters who were sought out by recruiters with the specific aim of turning them into Islamist extremists. Instead, group formation depended predominantly on preexisting social ties, with a lesser role for introductions through friends or acquaintances and the transmutation of virtual connections begun on the Internet into 'real-life' ones.

6.3   Social identity and the benefits of group membership

People have a universal desire to attain a satisfactory self-image, and an important part of that image is shaped by the 'social identity' derived from group membership.[570] Through a process of 'social categorization', individuals impose order on a complex social environment by subjectively dividing it into a multitude of groups. These groups are not necessarily formal organizations but may also include 'cognitive entities' based, for example, on social class, ethnicity or religion.[571] People tend to identify themselves with numerous groups simultaneously, with contextual factors influencing when a certain group-based identity is activated. For instance, someone's social identity as a supporter of a soccer team will be more prominent during match attendance than in a work environment. But some social identities can become so important that they are 'chronically salient', influencing all aspects of life.[572]

Terrorist groups provide chronically salient social identities through the demands placed on members. Participants are not only required to risk life and liberty but to re-imagine themselves according to the group's particular reality, be that as holy warriors, a revolutionary vanguard or nationalist freedom fighters.[573] But with social categorization providing individuals with a veritable marketplace of groups to choose from in their pursuit of self-fulfillment, why would someone be drawn to those involved in political violence in the first place?[574] As Dalgaard-Nielsen writes, the success of a movement depends on its ability to promote a worldview that resonates with potential recruits.[575] What benefits can terrorist groups offer their members that outweigh the very real risks of imprisonment and death?

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570   Henri Tajfel, "Social identity and intergroup behaviour," *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (1974): 68-69.
571   Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict," in *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, ed. W.G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey: Brooks-Cole, 1979), 40.
572   Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje, "Self and social identity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53(2002): 164, 166.
573   Arie Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, and Agnieszka Golec, "Individual motivations, the group process and organisational strategies in suicide terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 3, no. 1 (2011): 70-84; Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, "The attractions of jihadism: an identity approach to three Danish terrorism cases and the gallery of characters around them" (University of Copenhagen, 2011).
574   Tajfel, "Social identity," 69.
575   Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalization in Europe," 802.

People may join a terrorist group because they value the cause it strives for, essentially engaging in terrorism for strategic reasons.[576] The strategic rationale of terrorism is explored in more detail in chapter 7. For now, it is sufficient to note that a considerable body of research indicates that such instrumental motives are overshadowed by other benefits of membership. Participation in terrorism can provide *emotional* satisfaction, such as the ability to violently avenge perceived wrongs, *cognitive* benefits, such as the idea that one is fighting for a worthy cause, *social* assets like increased status and comradeship and, finally, opportunities for *personal gain* simply by taking under threat of violence what would otherwise have remained beyond reach.[577]

These rewards of group membership can explain not only why people *become* involved in terrorism but also why they *remain* involved. The benefits outlined in the previous paragraph can become so important to participants that they perpetuate their involvement, make disengagement more difficult and stifle criticism of group norms or behavior.[578] In extreme cases, individuals' social identity can have such a powerful influence on their worldview and behavior that they subjugate themselves entirely to the aims and well-being of the group, even willingly sacrificing their own lives.[579] Can social identity and the benefits of group membership explain the attraction of the Hofstadgroup?

6.3.1   Social identity and the Hofstadgroup

Part of the Hofstadgroup's appeal was that participants could imagine themselves as one of the few righteous Muslims in a country filled with unbelievers, sinners and apostates. For many participants, the group was an alternative to a Dutch Islamic community 'tainted' by imams who refused to discuss jihad in order to appease the Dutch government and by fellow-believers who failed to live and worship as 'true' Muslims.[580] The group's religious nature was not just some superficial gloss but its central appeal.[581] This is aptly illustrated by an interviewee who adamantly dispelled the idea, put forward in Dutch media, that the group practiced a 'cut-and-paste Islam'[582], insisting that religious beliefs were not only taken extremely seriously but rigorously studied

576   Martha Crenshaw, "Theories of terrorism: instrumental and organizational approaches," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1987): 14-15.

577   McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 336; Victoroff, "The mind of the terrorist," 30; Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 75-82; Dina Al Raffie, "Social Identity Theory for investigating islamic extremism in the diaspora," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (2013): 67-68.

578   Marisa Reddy Pynchon and Randy Borum, "Assessing threats of targeted group violence: contributions from social psychology," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 17, no. 3 (1999): 349.

579   Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, "Self and social identity," 163.

580   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4016, 4030, 4048-4051, 4085-4086, 4090-4093, 4127, 4131; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 1-2, 5, 9; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 11-12, 18-21, 27; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 215.

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

582   Margriet Oostveen, "De knip- en plak-Islam; hoe jonge moslims in Nederland hun radicale wereldbeeld samenstellen," *NRC Handelsblad*, 27 November 2004.

during gatherings.[583] Such statements suggest that by enabling self-perception as a 'true' Muslim, the cognitive benefits of participation were an important part of the group's appeal.

Participation in the Hofstadgroup also provided social and emotional benefits. Many participants valued simply being among friends; chatting, playing some soccer or sharing a meal.[584] One interviewee recalled feeling a strong sense of belonging and friendship during his very first encounter with other participants and that this motivated him to keep going back.[585] Another participant, an illegal immigrant, supposedly said that he greatly missed his family in Morocco, but that his 'brothers' had become his new family and that he loved them very much.[586] In jail after the murder of Van Gogh, one participant bragged about his Hofstadgroup 'membership', indicating participation could also bring the benefits of status.[587] An emotional benefit for participants was their ability to enter into short-term 'marriages', officiated by the groups' religious authority figures, which enabled them to have sex without breaking Islamic injunctions against casual relationships.[588]

An important finding is thus that the cognitive, social and emotional benefits *sustained* participation. However, there are no indications that they also *initiated* involvement. No-one seems to have consciously sought out the Hofstadgroup because they wanted so share in the self-perception of being a 'true believer' or because they were looking for comradeship. Partly this can be explained by the group's lack of a clear organizational structure and the fact that it was largely anonymous and unknown until Van Gogh's murder; few people were aware of its existence and outsiders had no clear point of contact to facilitate entry. Although the group became a household name after November 2004, it also became much more secretive during 2005's Piranha case, again precluding easy access by potential newcomers. Instead, preexisting social networks brought like-minded individuals together, after which group identity-related processes bound them together and worked to prolong their involvement.

6.4   Socialization into a worldview conducive to terrorism

As Della Porta argues, 'conversion to violence requires a specific redefinition of reality'.[589] In other words, an individual's willingness to commit acts of terrorism is a process that is generally not

583   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 12-13.
584   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4158; VERD: 19475, 19477, 19479-19480, 19866, 19935, 19980, 20012, 20131, 20213, 20228, 20313, 20363, 20468, 20484; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 2; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 13; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 3," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 1, 9; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 112, 117.
585   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 6-9.
586   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4049.
587   Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 105.
588   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4003, 4053, 4086-4087, 4101, 4110-4111, 4114-4115, 4145-4147, 4154; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 30-33; Chorus and Olgun, "Op de thee," 7.
589   Della Porta, *Social movements*, 136.

completed by the mere act of *joining* a terrorist group. An important next step is formed by members' internalization of worldviews and group norms conducive to the use of violence.[590] Before the next paragraphs discuss the group-based mechanisms that led the Hofstadgroup's participants to adopt such views, it is instructive to briefly revisit what those views were. How were they conducive to seeing terrorism as a legitimate form of behavior?

6.4.1   Revisiting the Hofstadgroup's ideology

Chapter three concluded that it is problematic to speak of a single or broadly shared 'Hofstadgroup ideology'. Yet broadly shared ideological themes existed which could provide justifications and even imperatives for the use of violence. The most important of these were a sense of crisis which mandated participation in violent jihad and a dichotomous worldview that made clear distinctions between a small rightly-guided in-group and a much larger and threatening out-group. For instance, Van Gogh's killer believed the Islamic world was beset by both external enemies (American imperialism, Western materialism, corrupt Middle-Eastern regimes) and foes within (apostates, Shiite heretics, 'Westernized' Muslims). Only an 'awakening' to these realities and a willingness to fight and sacrifice in defense of 'true' Islam could stave off the imminent destruction of true Islam and the persecution of its adherents.[591]

Participants also placed considerable emphasis on their beliefs' normative aspects. Only polities structured and run in accordance with a strict and dogmatic interpretation of Islamic law ('Sharia') were seen to suffice.[592] The group could also be very inward looking. De Koning aptly described participants as engaged in a 'competition of piety'.[593] Not only did they harshly judge Muslims outside of the group's boundaries, their critical eye did not spare compatriots who failed to adhere to group norms, such as growing a beard, or who were deemed to have committed transgressions such as accepting the aid of a lawyer, thereby undermining Allah's status as the sole source of legal authority.[594] Some went so far as to refuse to participate in a game of soccer as doing so would implicitly mean accepting the man-made and therefore tawhid-undermining rules of the Dutch soccer association.[595]

The normative aspects of the Hofstadgroup's ideology also fed participants' adversarial relationship with out-groups. Most notably in the case of takfir, as excommunication carries

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590   Egerton, *Jihad in the West*, 151; Silke, "Holy warriors," 111.
591   Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 145-159.
592   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 63-64, 124-125, 127-131, 137, 140, 151, 163; AHA103/120: 1171; AHA1106/1123: 2555; AHA1107/1124: 3226; 1101/1117: 4049-4050, 4052, 4131; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 2-12.
593   De Koning, "Changing worldviews and friendship," 387.
594   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19475; De Koning, "Changing worldviews and friendship," 387-388; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 181; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 2-3; Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 16-17; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 3.
595   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 3," 2.

with it the justification to murder the apostate.[596] Extremist elements within the group also took their understanding of tawhid to mean that non-Islamic laws could and should be flaunted and that unbelievers' property and, in some cases, even their lives were free for the taking.[597] In short, while the Hofstadgroup lacked a clearly defined and commonly-held ideology, the group's more extremist participants in particular held to and conveyed beliefs that could provide motivations and justifications for the use of violence. These beliefs also provided normative standards by which Muslims both in and outside of the group were judged, creating behavioral and ideological rules to which participants were expected to adhere. The next sections discuss how these views were spread and upheld.

6.5   The underground life

A group's 'social reality value' is its ability to define moral standards for its members and enforce their compliance.[598] For example, groups with high social reality value are better able to influence their members' thinking on such matters as what constitutes 'good' and who or what is 'evil'.[599] An important variable that determines a group's social reality value is the degree of 'competition' it faces from other groups. As section 4 explained, people tend to have numerous social identities whose salience is often context dependent; a person's professional attitudes and behavior will tend to dominate in a work setting, affiliation with a certain sports team during matches, etcetera. When numerous group memberships 'compete' for influence on a person's values and behavior, it is unlikely that any one in particular will become predominant. However, when all but one group identity remains, its ability to exert such control increases markedly.[600]

The criminal nature of terrorism forces those who engage in it to lead a covert existence. As authorities deploy more means to apprehend or kill terrorists, the latter's need for secrecy increases. The necessity of maintaining operational security can force terrorist groups to 'go underground', that is to lead an entirely secret and withdrawn existence. Once underground, their members have only each other to rely on, leading to increased interdependence, the strengthening of interpersonal bonds and a heightened desire to protect comrades and the larger group.[601] 'Having entered a world of conspiracy and danger, the [terrorists] are bound together before a common threat of exposure, imprisonment or death.'[602] In such a setting, the group's social reality value increases dramatically and its ability to influence members' worldviews and behavior along

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596   Brooke, "Jihadist strategic debates," 202; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4052.
597   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 161-162; AHD108/137: 8713-8714, 8765-8766; AHD8709/8738: sessie 8713; VERD: 19745; GET: 14086, 14094.
598   McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization," 423-424.
599   Ibid., 423.
600   Ibid.
601   Ibid.; Pynchon and Borum, "Assessing threats," 350; Della Porta, *Social movements*, 133-135, 180; Egerton, *Jihad in the West*, 156-157; Tinka Veldhuis and Edwin Bakker, "Causale factoren van radicalisering en hun onderlinge samenhang," *Vrede en Veiligheid* 36, no. 4 (2007): 458-459.
602   Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 107.

with it. Isolation can thus increase a terrorist group's ability to fashion the worldviews of its adherents, facilitating their acceptance of political violence as necessary and legitimate.[603]

6.5.1   The Hofstadgroup's increasing isolation

The Hofstadgroup's participants gradually withdrew from society. Mosque attendance was largely supplanted by privately held discussions and prayers.[604] The group became the focal point of social interactions, in some cases supplanting old friends and family.[605] A number of participants saw each other on an almost daily basis and several of them even lived together for varying periods of time.[606] One of the travelers to Pakistan or Afghanistan quit a part-time job because he felt it clashed with his religious convictions. Some others abandoned school or jobs for similar reasons or were encouraged to do so.[607] The numerous arrests, the knowledge that the group had attracted the AIVD's attention and the inability or unwillingness of imams to discuss jihad-related topics formed external pressures towards isolation.[608] In the words of an interviewee: '[y]ou were at home or at [Van Gogh's to-be killer's] home. That was it really.'[609] The latter even described a diminishing social circle as the abandonment of an old life filled with unbelief and therefore as the sign of a true believer.[610]

Yet the Hofstadgroup's withdrawal from society fell short of what could be considered 'going underground'. Many participants, including members of the extremist inner circle, continued to hold (part-time) jobs or attend school.[611] Their participation in online discussion forums and their attempts at convincing other young Muslims of the validity of their views occasionally exposed them to dissenting opinions.[612] Although the authorities' interest in them sparked a degree of watchfulness bordering on the paranoid, with participants removing the batteries from cell phones during meetings, none of them went 'off the grid' until 2005's Piranha case.[613]

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603   Egerton, *Jihad in the West*, 155.
604   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4002, 4004, 4016, 4049, 4054, 4092, 4177-4179, 4199; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 11-12, 20; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 8-9.
605   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4049.
606   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 3," 2; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 23-24, 92; AHA03/20: 860; VERD: 20212; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," REL00: 51-53.
607   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHA03/20: 1299; VERD: 20114; De Koning and Meijer, "Going all the way," 231.
608   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 11; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 104; AHA105/122: 1811-1813, 1837; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 5-6, 8-9.
609   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 20.
610   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHD02/31: 5793.
611   Ibid., AHA03/20: 860; AHA804/821: 1664; AHD1604/1633: 6716-6719; AHF1601/1639: 9279, 9349, 9462, 9535, 9620; AHF1602/1640: 10000, 10032; AHF10003/10041: 10311; VERD: 19443, 19852, 19915, 19981, 20111, 20217, 20463-20464, 20518-20519; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 38.
612   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHD07/36: 8400-8401,8409-8412; AHD8409/8438: 9173-9175, 9179-9181, 9184-9195, 9216-9220; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 18-19, 30-31.
613   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 5-6; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 25-26; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 1," 1.

Even then, only two individuals did so; the person who evaded arrest in November 2004 and his Islamic wife.[614] By contrast, the other ringleader of the Piranha case continued to live at home with his family until his apprehension in October 2005.

Because the Hofstadgroup as a whole never went underground, the degree to which isolation influenced its internal cohesion and social reality value was limited. Nevertheless, the trend towards increasing isolation, one that was particularly noticeable among the more extremist participants, had two important consequences. First of all, it made participants relatively more exposed to people with radical and extremist ideas while lessening their contacts with individuals who could have challenged their increasing extremism. Secondly, by cutting ties to former friends, the Hofstadgroup rose in importance as the center of participants' social life. Isolation therefore sustained involvement by increasing the group's importance as participants' foremost sources of social ties. It also catalyzed participants' adoption of views that saw the use of violence as justified and necessary.

6.6   Social learning theory

Social learning theory essentially holds that 'criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others, especially in intimate, primary groups'.[615] While specific attention is given to the role of primary groups such as family and close friends as the setting in which the mechanisms that constitute social learning theory are at their most influential, this form of learning is not exclusively reliant on face-to-face interactions. It can also take place through exposure to extremist materials encountered on social media or the emulation of attitudes or behavior seen on television.[616] Although developed as an explanation for deviant forms of behavior, social learning can be used to explain pro-social as well as criminal attitudes and actions.[617] Whether social learning leads to one or the other depends on a range of factors.

Several circumstances make it is more likely that social learning will contribute to violent behavior. The first is 'differential association' or relatively greater exposure to individuals or groups who commit violence or justify its use. When others are seen to engage in criminal or violent activities without suffering negative consequences, or even benefiting from it, the observer's previously acquired inhibitions to delinquent behavior may be lowered. Second, violence is more likely when individuals hold beliefs that portray such behavior in neutral or positive terms. Third, violence is more likely when its perceived benefits outweigh perceived costs, a calculation that can

614   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4062.
615   Christine S. Sellers, John K. Cochran, and L. Thomas. Winfree, Jr., "Social learning theory and courtship violence: an empirical test," in *Social learning theory and the explanation of crime*, ed. Ronald L. Akers and Gary F. Jensen (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 109.
616   Albert Bandura, *Social learning theory* (New York: General Learning Press, 1971), 2-13; Lieven Pauwels and Nele Schils, "Differential online exposure to extremist content and political violence: testing the relative strength of social learning and competing perspectives," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28, no. 1 (2016): 1-29.
617   Pauwels and Schils, "Differential online exposure," 3.

be influenced, for instance, through religious beliefs or political convictions that portray violence as necessary for the attainment or defense of a greater good. Finally, violent behavior becomes more likely when individuals have violent 'role models' they can observe directly or indirectly, such as through the Internet.[618]

6.6.1 Social learning in the Hofstadgroup

The Hofstadgroup was a prime setting in which social learning could exert its influence for two reasons. First of all, the group was increasingly the main or even exclusive source of social contacts for many participants. Secondly, social gatherings were the group's most frequent communal activity. Socializing with friends was an important aspect of these meetings, but they were also used for lectures and discussions on fundamentalist, radical and extremist interpretations of Islam.[619] These gatherings were not formal seminars dedicated to religious indoctrination, however. They appear to have been organized largely on an ad hoc basis, without mandatory attendance and with little in the way of a syllabus to structure the discussions and lectures.[620] While some participants showed up several times a week or even every day, others attended only once or twice per month.[621] Given these conditions, how did social learning contribute to initiating and sustaining involvement in the Hofstadgroup?

Social learning exerted a notable influence on Hofstadgroup participants in several ways. First of all through direct association with individuals who supported the use of violence in principle and practice.[622] Several witnesses and an interviewee mentioned or implied that the intensive contacts they had with other Hofstadgroup participants led them to adopt their points of view, even if only for a time.[623] For instance, one witness explained that she may have become willing to use violence had the group's influence not been restrained by the contacts she still maintained with ideologically non-radical individuals.[624] Likewise, a former participant explained that his ultimate disavowal of extremist Islam only came about after he had physically distanced himself

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618   Ronald L. Akers and Adam L. Silverman, "Toward a social learning model of violence and terrorism," in *Violence: from theory to research*, ed. Margaret A. Zahn, Henry H. Brownstein, and Shelly L. Jackson (Newark: LexisNexis Anderson, 2004), 20-24.

619   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 115; AHA102/119: 186-187, 100; AHA106/123: 2585-2586, 2600, 2693; AHA2509/2526: 3799-3803; AHD2501/2530: 5499-5503; 2501/2517: 4090-4099, 4201; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 2-3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 12-13; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 2, 4-5, 9.

620   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 3," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 14-15; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19476-19477, 19479, 19918-19919, 19944, 20080, 20228, 20363, 20486; 19401/19417: 14099-14100; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 5; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 2.

621   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19476, 19866, 19980, 20313, 20484.

622   For instance: Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 14.

623   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 133-134; 101/117: 4030-4032, 4084-4086, 4127-4128; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 10; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 1-2, 5.

624   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4028-4032, 4050-4051.

from the Hofstadgroup and was thus no longer exposed to the ideas and norms propagated by his erstwhile peers.[625] Two interviewees' recollection of the Van Gogh murder is especially striking. One admitted initially feeling a sense of awe for the murderer, while another explained that he was inspired to plan an attack of his own.[626]

Social learning also influenced Hofstadgroup participants by exposing them *indirectly* to 'role models' of violent behavior and radical or extremist interpretations of Islam. Police investigators found that participants shared (parts of) a large digital 'library' containing books and treatises by Salafist thinkers and theologians who justified violence, such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb.[627] Furthermore, participants exchanged various digital media that included video and audio files in which jihadist militants or ideologues practiced and preached religiously justified violence. These included grisly videos of war crimes perpetrated by Chechen jihadists that were occasionally watched during group gatherings.[628] Finally, there was the Internet which facilitated access to numerous jihadist role models; most notably men like Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 hijackers and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq until his death in 2006.[629]

Social learning also made a contribution to the adoption of militant beliefs and some participants' willingness to use terrorism by helping instill the notion that the use of violence would be met with reward. The clearest example of this concerns the 2004 Madrid bombings. To the group's more militant elements, the attack demonstrated that terrorism in Europe was feasible, legitimate and effective, as the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq was seen as a direct consequence of the attack.[630] The attack helped shift the motivation of some of the most militant participants from joining jihadist insurgents overseas to conducting terrorism in the Netherlands. Social learning again played a role in instilling the view that death in the service of Islam would be rewarded with martyrdom. This occurred partly through exposure to ideological materials and role models mentioned in previous paragraphs, and partly in a far more direct fashion.[631] One female participant was promised a 'beautiful martyr's death' by a male group member who suggested they drive a car filled with explosives into a shopping center.[632]

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625   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 11.
626   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 6; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 27-28; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 10.
627   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 47; NCTV Employee 1, "Personal interview 2," 2; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 164.
628   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 47, 138-140; AHA107/124: 2865-2866; GET: 4128, 4179, 18231, 18410, 18452; VERD: 19477-19478, 20014, 20113; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 43-44; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 13, 54, 82, 110-111, 126, 139, 154, 169, 176, 181, 196.
629   A[.], "Deurwaarders van Allah," 14; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 9.
630   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 22-23; De Koning and Meijer, "Going all the way," 232; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 5.
631   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 25-26, 28; 01/13: 81, 130-131, 134, 151, 163; AHB103/127: 4040-4041; AHD4007/4036: 8411, AHD4008/4037: 8573-8574, 8594, 8773-8775; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 14, apendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 38; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".
632   Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 82.

Social learning forms a key explanatory factor for how participants adopted extremist views and, in some cases, planned or perpetrated acts of terrorism. It shows that extremist views and behavior were in large part *taught*. Direct interactions with individuals who justified terrorism, including some who tried to join Islamist insurgents overseas and one committed an actual terrorist attack, were key to the conveyance of attitudes favorable to the use of violence and provided role models of militancy to be emulated. Indirect exposure to jihadist role models, terrorist attacks and extremist materials, principally via the Internet, further taught participants to see terrorism as justified, necessary and effective. Through the notion of martyrdom, they were brought to believe that death in the service of Islam held distinct *personal* advantages that outweighed the costs of forfeiting life on earth. In short, social learning constituted a particularly important small-group dynamic.

6.7   The influence of leaders

Leaders are individuals with the ability to harness their followers' energy 'in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives'.[633] Within the specific context of terrorist groups, leaders' influence allows them to do more than exert operational control and guidance. They can also play an important role in safeguarding the group's cohesion and in socializing its members into an extremist worldview.[634] Leaders' ability to function as such depends on their credibility and authority, which can stem from several sources, such as ideological knowledge, operational expertise or personal charisma.[635] Keeping to the division of the group-level analysis over two chapters, the following paragraphs deal with leaders' ability to shape terrorist groups organizationally and ideologically. The next chapter looks at their ability to instigate actual acts of violence.

6.7.1   Leaders and authority figures in the Hofstadgroup

Abu Khaled, the middle-aged Syrian man who provided religious instruction until he fled the country on the day of Van Gogh's murder was the most important ideological authority among participants.[636] There are, however, no indications that this man actively sought to create a common group ideology or harness its participants' energy for particular ends, as the above-mentioned definition of leadership requires.[637] This may not have been possible even if he had

633   Bruce E. Winston and Kathleen Patterson, "An integrative definition of leadership," *International Journal of Leadership Studies* 1, no. 2 (2006): 7.

634   Crenshaw, "The causes of terrorism," 389; Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism," 390; David R. Mandel, "The role of instigators in radicalization to violent extremism," in *Psychosocial, organizational and cultural aspects of terrorism*, ed. Anne Speckhard (Neuilly-Sur-Sein: NATO, 2011), 2-6; Milla, Faturochman, and Ancok, "The impact of leader-follower interactions," 96-97.

635   Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 93; Hofmann and Dawson, "The neglected role of charismatic authority in the study of terrorist groups and radicalization," 349; Milla, Faturochman, and Ancok, "The impact of leader-follower interactions," 92.

636   Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 19; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 4.

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

wanted to; participants appear to have seen him as good teacher, but not as a leader, as someone who had to be obeyed or even as a particularly inspiring individual.[638] His role is best described as an 'epistemic authority'; an individual whose perceived knowledge enabled him to provide an authoritative interpretation of religious and political matters to the other participants.[639]

Van Gogh's to-be murderer certainly gained the respect of other participants for his knowledge of Islam.[640] His writings and teachings at group gatherings began to include clear incitement to violence from March 2004 onward.[641] But like Abu Khaled, Van Gogh's murderer does not seem to have actively tried to force the group into a certain ideological mold or to shape it organizationally. Descriptions paint him as quiet, withdrawn and as someone who was neither seen as a leader nor assumed such a role.[642] Essentially the same conclusion is reached with regard to other individuals whom the group held in high esteem, some of whom acquired status through their greater knowledge of Arabic or their outspoken militancy. While their higher status meant that they were relatively influential in the conveyance of fundamentalist, radical or extremist interpretations of Islam, none appear to have had the ability or inclination to consciously shape the group, whether ideologically or organizationally.[643]

At least as far as the ideological and organizational development of the group was concerned, the Hofstadgroup lacked clear leaders. While its social pecking order clearly included individuals with more influence over matters of ideology than others, these persons are more accurately described as *authority figures* than as leaders. It could be argued that participants saw men like Bin Laden or al-Zarqawi as their leaders, but this does not change the group's essentially leaderless nature. While such jihadist role models certainly had a major influence, it was indirectly and unconsciously exercised. There is no reason to believe that foreign jihadists knew of the Hofstadgroup's existence, let alone tried to exercise control over its activities to accomplish a joint goal, as is required of any individual who would meet the criteria of 'leader'.

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638   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 33; Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 48; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 33, 83, 87, 112; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 3.

639   Kruglanski, Chen, and Golec, "Individual motivations."

640   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19918, 19935, 20004-20005, 20012-20013, 20079, 20227, 20236; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 4.

641   Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 150-159; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 81; Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 19.

642   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 3-4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 13; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19478, 19868, 19868, 20212, 20227; Public Prosecutor 2, "Personal interview 1," 4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 1," 2.

643   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 4; NCTV Employee 1, "Personal interview 1," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 2, "Personal interview 1," 4; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 3; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 13-14; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHA05/22: 2174-2175; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 3.

6.8 Peer pressure

Peer pressure plays an important role in upholding and inculcating group norms,[644] which Pynchon and Borum define as the 'implicit and explicit expectations for the conduct and opinions of individual members'.[645] In Crenshaw's words, 'peer pressure can induce people to perform acts that they would ordinarily be prevented from doing by moral restraints'.[646] Peer pressure is of course not a mechanism unique to terrorist groups, but its influence in that particular setting is notable. For groups involved in illegal or violent activities, internal dissent can be dangerous, making them especially susceptible to producing strong internal pressures towards conformity.[647] The following paragraphs discuss four forms of peer pressure found in the literature and assess whether they played a role in the Hofstadgroup's development.

Extremity shift (also known as 'risky shift'[648] or 'group polarization'[649]) is a process whereby a group's 'average' opinion becomes increasingly extreme over time. The first reason for this is what McCauley and Segal label 'variance decrease'; the tendency of groups to become more homogeneous as individuals with deviating views leave or are expelled.[650] Secondly, 'social comparison' plays a role. Individuals may vie for their peers' approval or pursue status by championing the group's values. In the process, they create an incentive for their compatriots to do the same, as no-one wants to be seen to be lagging behind in enthusiasm. This creates a process whereby individuals trigger each other to voice ever more extremist positions in order to stand out positively, thus steadily moving the group as a whole to more militant points of views. Finally, there is the 'relevant arguments' mechanism, whereby group discussions will be biased in favor of views that support group norms, thereby contributing to their acceptance.[651]

Another way in which peer pressure can exert its influence is through the 'majority effect'. Over the course of several experiments, Asch found that many individuals will adjust their opinions to correspond to the majority view expressed by the group in which they are participating, even if that view is clearly wrong.[652] During one such experiment a research subject was asked to compare a line with several other lines of varying length and to judge which of those matched the first. When the other study participants, who were actually working together with the researcher, suddenly and unanimously started giving wrong answers to this simple task, more than a third of the research subjects felt compelled to go along with the majority. Those who did stick to their

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644   Bartlett and Miller, "The edge of violence," 16.
645   Pynchon and Borum, "Assessing threats," 350.
646   Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism," 397.
647   Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 106; Horgan, *The psychology of terrorism*, 125; McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 335.
648   Silke, "Holy warriors," 111.
649   Pynchon and Borum, "Assessing threats," 344.
650   McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 340-342.
651   Ibid., 341-342; Pynchon and Borum, "Assessing threats," 344.
652   Solomon E. Asch, "Studies of independence and conformity: 1. a minority of one against a unanimous majority," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied* 70, no. 9 (1956): 1-70.

opinion experienced self-doubt, felt uneasy about their conspicuous deviance and feared the group's disapproval.[653] Asch's research is testament to both the power of the group in shaping the views of individuals and the difficulties of maintaining a contrary opinion.

Two forms of peer pressure specific to terrorist groups are public commitments to violence and what Crenshaw calls the 'blood price' of involvement.[654] Some terrorist organizations make their members publicly commit to carrying out an act of violence. Videotapes of would-be suicide bombers announcing their intentions and bidding farewell to friends and families are an especially strong example of this practice.[655] Although ostensibly framed as an inspirational message, the public distribution of such videos creates strong pressures on the would-be terrorist to follow through. Once such a statement of intention has been recorded and publicized, there can be no going back without considerable loss of face. Finally, there is the 'blood price' to be reckoned with; the death or capture of comrades may prompt remaining group members to strengthen their adherence to the norms the fallen represented as a coping mechanism for dealing with their loss.[656]

6.8.1   Peer pressure among Hofstadgroup participants

Peer pressure had a notable influence on Hofstadgroup participants' adoption of fundamentalist, radical and extremist views although not all participants were equally exposed to it.[657] However, of the mechanisms identified above only evidence of the extremity shift and, to a smaller degree, the majority effect was found in the data. While one of the Piranha ringleaders did record a video that, in tone and content, strongly resembled a statement of intent to commit violence, there are no indications that he was pressured in any way to do so. Similarly, witnessing the arrest of group participants does not seem to have noticeably led the remainder to strengthen their ideological convictions. It could be argued that these arrests did contribute to group solidarity, however, as they prompted several instances of participants collectively donating money to their arrested friends' wives.[658]

Variance decrease was the most notable aspect of extremity shift within the Hofstadgroup. Newcomers were questioned about their interpretation of tawhid to assess whether it corresponded with the group norm of denouncing democracy and its supporters.[659] This provided a basic degree of homogeneity by keeping out individuals with markedly different opinions on the

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653   Solomon E. Asch, "Opinions and social pressure," *Scientific American* 193, no. 5 (1955): 31-35.
654   Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism," 396.
655   Ariel Merari, "Social, organizational and psychological factors in suicide terrorism," in *Root causes of terrorism: myths, reality and ways forward*, ed. Tore Bjørgo (London / New York: Routledge, 2005), 79-80; Kruglanski and Fishman, "Psychological factors," 23.
656   Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism," 396.
657   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 3.
658   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 89-92.
659   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 2-3.

matter. For instance, an old friend of Van Gogh's to-be killer stopped visiting him because he did not agree with the increasingly extremist views being espoused at his friend's house.[660] It seems that extremity shift was also taking place via the relevant arguments mechanism. Hofstadgroup participants fanned each other's radicalism by constantly talking about fundamentalist Islam and jihad and because there were few divergent opinions on these topics.[661]

Such like-mindedness was further established by the importance attached to takfir. According to one interviewee, it was an almost daily practice for participants to ask each other whether they were willing to excommunicate a wide range of Muslims who failed to live up the group's extreme views.[662] Given that acceptance of takfir was the majority opinion, this practice is reminiscent of the majority effect described above. As the 'correct' answer was clearly to support a very broad application of takfir, holding on to divergent opinions became more difficult. This emphasis on an unbridled interpretation of takfir also contributed to further variance decrease; in late 2004, several participants broke with the Hofstadgroup because they felt the use of takfir had gone too far.[663]

On several occasions, pressure was deliberately exerted to engender acceptance of group norms and to maintain the group's organizational integrity. A female participant was repeatedly shown videos of suicide bombers and told that she would one day commit a similar attack. She was also given a knife to hold and made to watch footage of people having their throats cut, while another participant told her she would learn how to slaughter too.[664] In another example, a participant who questioned the group's use of takfir was met with verbal aggression; some of the other participant's present went so far as to demand this individual retake the confession of faith.[665]

There were also less sinister instances of peer pressure. One male participant was questioned about his lackluster participation in prayer sessions and repeatedly lectured about his refusal to grow a long beard to the point that he no longer felt welcome.[666] Another was told he was not allowed to talk with girls.[667] Although attendance of Hofstadgroup gatherings was not mandatory, anyone who showed up infrequently was liable to get a call from other participants asking them to explain their absence. Those who persisted risked becoming the subject of malicious rumors that he or she had become an apostate.[668] Several women, who disengaged from the group because

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660   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 132; GET: 18414-18422.
661   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 10.
662   Ibid., 2-3.
663   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4002-4003, 4018-4020, 4030, 4048-4058, 4085-4086, 4092, 4100, 4125-4127, 4129, 4204; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 37, 93.
664   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/13: 35, 134, 162; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 81-82.
665   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, "Personal interview 1," 2-3.
666   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19475.
667   Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 83.
668   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 5.

they felt the use of Takfir went too far, expressed fear of reprisals.[669] Two of them were threatened for cooperating with the police.[670]

These examples show that peer pressure influenced the Hofstadgroup's development in two ways. First, it played an important role in propagating and maintaining adherence to fundamentalist and extremist group norms (growing a beard, readiness to use takfir). Second, peer pressure made it harder for individuals to cease participation by making such a decision costly in terms of reputation damage and personal threats. Like the trend towards isolation, peer pressure contributed to the Hofstadgroup's cohesion and facilitated the spread and radical and extremist views.

6.9   Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that the Hofstadgroup's formation was heavily reliant on preexisting ties of friendship, rather than conscious attempts at recruitment. Once initial participation had come about through these social networks, various group processes began to bind participants together, giving the Hofstadgroup a degree of organizational substance. The application of social identity theory revealed the key role of that the social, cognitive and emotional benefits of participation had in sustaining involvement. Participants did not seek out the Hofstadgroup because they wanted to become extremists or terrorists. Instead, it appears that they found their way into this group and were then motivated to stay for reasons such as friendship and the sense of being among 'true' Muslims.

Social learning theory provided a key explanation for how fundamentalist and extremist ideas and models of behavior were transmitted among members of the group. This occurred both directly (e.g. during lectures) and indirectly (e.g. by watching jihadist videos that glorified violence) through exposure to justifications for violence and to violent role models like Bin Laden and al-Zarqawi. Another important dynamic was the group's voluntary isolation from Dutch society which increasingly cut its participants off from opinions and norms contrary to their own. Over time this increased the Hofstadgroup's social reality value, or the degree to which participants were influenced by commonly held views and norms, and strengthened its cohesion as participants' social circle gradually excluded anyone outside of the group's boundaries.

Some group-level factors influenced the Hofstadgroup through their *absence*. The Hofstadgroup lacked clear leaders who could shape the group ideologically or organizationally. While several authority figures existed whose lectures and writings were important to the group's adoption of fundamentalist, radical and extremist views, none appear to have had the ability or desire to purposefully mold the group. Ideological conformity and a degree organizational integrity were

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669   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4018-4020, 4029, 4052, 4092; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 91, 101.

670   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4122, 4113; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 98-102.

safeguarded largely autonomously through various forms of peer pressure. Group extremity shift and the majority effect induced some individuals with contrary views to leave the group. The considerable importance placed on the themes of tawhid and takfir compelled participants to adopt these views as their own. Peer pressure also threw up barriers to disengagement from the group and was on occasion exerted on specific individuals to gain their compliance with group norms.

These conclusions underwrite the importance of the group-level of analysis for understanding involvement in terrorist groups is initiated and sustained. What the preceding analysis has left unanswered, however, is whether group processes can shed light on the Hofstadgroup's actual and intended use of violence. That discussion is the subject of the next chapter.