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

Schuurman, B.W.

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Author: Schuurman, B.W.

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10. Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

Following the 9/11 attacks, research on terrorism benefited from an influx of new researchers and funding. However, almost fifteen years and an untold number of publications later, many aspects of terrorism are still poorly understood. That also applies to the focus of this thesis; namely, how and why people become involved in European homegrown jihadism. Chief among the various reasons for this state of affairs has been the long-standing scarcity of primary-sources based research. The difficulties involved in accessing (former) terrorists for interviews or using data gathered by government agencies, has made researchers overly reliant on media reporting. A secondary source of information that is frequently very succinct, potentially biased and too often inaccurate; in other words, incapable of serving as the main, let alone the *only*, foundation for academic research.

There are dozens of potential explanations for involvement in terrorism. Yet the scarcity of primary-sources means that most of these have been insufficiently empirically assessed, raising concerns about their validity. These issues shaped this thesis' methodological approach in two ways. First, collecting primary-sources based data was seen as a prerequisite. Second, because no single theoretical perspective on involvement in terrorism could count on strong empirical support, a multi-theoretical analytical framework was adopted. This second decision also followed from the widely-held view that involvement in terrorism is the result of a complex process in which a multitude of factors, spread over multiple levels of analysis, play a role. Consequently, this thesis chose to study involvement by combing the breadth of existing insights, divided over the structural, group and individual levels of analysis, with extensive primary-sources based data.

Terrorism, the deliberate use of indiscriminate violence against civilians for propagandistic purposes and psychological effects, comes in many forms. This thesis focused specifically on the 'homegrown jihadist' typology as it manifested itself in Europe from 2004 onward, most notably with the attacks in Madrid of that year and those in London in July 2005. The attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016, as well as the large number of Europeans who have joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq, have demonstrated that this form of terrorism continuous to be a pan-European security threat. Research on European homegrown jihadism is therefore relevant for policy makers, counterterrorism practitioners and journalists as well as academics. From the European homegrown jihadist typology, one case was selected for in-depth analysis; the Dutch 'Hofstadgroup' that existed between 2002 and 2005.

Case selection was partly practical; the author was able to gain access to the Dutch police files on the group and managed to interview several former participants, thus addressing the lack of primary sources noted above. No less important, there are sufficient similarities between the

Hofstadgroup and the broader European homegrown jihadist trend, as well as the European 'foreign fighters' who have left for Syria and Iraq over the past few years, to allow the case to inform the wider debate on this typology of terrorism. Finally, existing research on the Hofstadgroup reflects the issues present in the literature on terrorism remarked on above in that it is predominantly based on secondary sources. Work on the Hofstadgroup has also been largely descriptive, emphasizing that there is room for research on how and why participants became involved that is both empirically grounded and theoretically informed in its analysis.

Guiding the research was the following overarching question: What factors governed the involvement processes of participants in the Hofstadgroup during its 2002-2005 existence? The main research question was addressed through three subsidiary ones. The thesis looked first at structural, then at group-level and finally at individual-level explanations for involvement in the Hofstadgroup. For each of these levels of analysis, literature reviews identified existing explanations for involvement in terrorism which were then utilized as 'lenses' through which to view the empirical data, thus allowing relevant explanatory factors and processes to be identified. This concluding chapter draws together the various analytical strands to address the main research question. It then presents academic and policy-relevant implications that are relevant to homegrown jihadism more broadly and rounds off the discussion with a brief examination of the thesis' limitations and fruitful avenues for future research.

10.2 Key findings

Analyzing involvement in the Hofstadgroup using three levels of analysis allowed a multifaceted perspective on the participation process to emerge. Each level of analysis contained numerous relevant factors and found that they fulfilled different roles. Some contributed to the *motive* for involvement in the group or the use violence, others *enabled* this process. Yet others were *triggers*; setting individuals on a path toward participation in the group and, in some cases, the planning or perpetration of acts of terrorism. Furthermore, there was no single, commonly experienced process of involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Participants found and remained in the group for a variety of reasons. Additionally, the findings show that 'involvement' took on numerous forms, the majority of which did not include terrorism-related activities. Crucially, the factors governing the involvement processes were *heterogeneous* in nature. Even so, some generalizations can be made.

The structural level of analysis looked at the broader social and political context in which involvement in the Hofstadgroup came about. It revealed the crucial role of geopolitical events such as the 9/11 attacks and the U.S.-led 'War on Terror' that followed. In many future Hofstadgroup participants, these events triggered 'cognitive openings' that led them to study the motives of the terrorists and to scrutinize Western states' foreign policies. These geopolitical events led many participants to become acquainted with radical and extremist interpretations of Islam and contributed to a political awakening that, rightly or wrongly, produced a sense

of Muslim victimization across the globe at the hands of Western imperialists and corrupt Middle-Eastern regimes. A sense of vicarious victimization and the desire to help and avenge co-religionists in places like Palestine and Afghanistan became key motives for some of the group's most militant participants' desire to travel abroad as foreign fighters and, later, to plan acts of terrorism in the Netherlands.

Structural-level factors were also important as *enablers* of involvement processes and as the likely trigger for the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Hofstadgroup participant. The Internet and its easy access to extremist views and jihadist 'role models' facilitated the adoption of radical and extremist views. The freedoms offered by the Dutch liberal democratic political system made it relatively easy to hold private meetings, to access and disseminate radical and extremist views and to travel abroad. Widespread conservative views within the Dutch Muslim community 'socially facilitated' participants' adoption of fundamentalist and radical convictions. Lack of police protection for Van Gogh made him an easy target. Finally, the airing of the Islam-critical film *Submission, part one* that Van Gogh had directed, was in all likelihood the structural-level factor that triggered the murderer to plan and prepare his attack.

Contrary to the assumption frequently made by politicians and the media, there were no clear indications that socioeconomic inequality played a role in motivating involvement in the Hofstadgroup or bringing about the adoption of extremist views. Neither did the harsh tone of the Dutch debate on integration and Islam feature as an important factor in motivating involvement or sparking a desire to utilize terrorist violence. Participants did indeed face discrimination and even physical violence based on their religious convictions, but these experiences were principally important in *sustaining* rather than *motivating* their involvement in the group. That the Hofstadgroup was not a response to grievances shared by the broader Dutch Muslim community was also apparent by its lack of popular support. This was not a vanguard movement, but an extremist cell that was as critical of its potential supporters as it was of non-Muslim 'unbelievers'.

The group-level of analysis focused specifically on intra-group dynamics. It was able to account for how the Hofstadgroup formed, what kept it together and how radical and extremist views were adopted and maintained. Preexisting social ties brought like-minded individuals together who were then bound by friendship and a shared sense of identity that revolved around their interpretation of Islam. Within this setting, social learning increased participants' exposure to views legitimizing and justifying the use of violence, strengthening their division of the world into a small group of the righteous threatened by a large and hostile out-group of unbelievers and apostates. Lectures, interaction with other participants and exposure to jihadist 'role models' in and outside of the group were crucial to the exploration and adoption of new identities as 'true' Muslims. The group's isolationist tendencies increased its cognitive and behavioral influence over participants. Peer pressures toward ideological conformity served a similar purpose by engendering a degree of ideological homogeneity among participants.

A key finding was that the group-level of analysis was unable to fully account for the acts of terrorism that some participants planned or perpetrated. The planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism were distinctly *personal* in origin, rather than the result of communal deliberations. This stemmed from the peculiar organizational characteristics of the Hofstadgroup and its lack of clear leaders in particular. There were numerous *authority figures*, but none of them tried to be or were seen as leaders who could mold the group ideologically, organizationally or operationally. The absence of leaders also meant that participants could not in any significant sense displace their personal responsibility for violence to others who had ordered or organized attacks. Any impetus for committing an act of violence depended predominantly on the initiative and ability of individual participants.

The individual level of analysis studied participants' biographical backgrounds and personal characteristics. It helped explain what triggered involvement processes, what led some participants to consider or use terrorism, how those individuals were able to overcome inhibitions to the use of force and it shed light on what it was that made *these particular* individuals more likely to participate in violence than others. A small number of individuals became involved in the Hofstadgroup as a result of 'unfreezing'; the dissolution of everyday commitments or old social networks that made them more amenable to making new acquaintances or considering new ideas. The majority, however, experienced cognitive openings that prompted a reexamination of previously held beliefs or a search for answers to the bigger questions of life, death and religious identity. Trigger events for these cognitive openings were a mix of the geopolitical and the personal, but in many cases they resulted in 'significance quests'; attempts to find personal meaning in a reorientation on radical or extremist Islam.

A key explanatory factor was found in the concept of fanaticism. Fanaticism not only accounted for the central motive in Van Gogh's murder but was specific enough to explain why out of a group of several religious extremists, only one acted on those beliefs. The key to this distinction was the personal context in which extremist beliefs were adopted. The murderer stood out because 1) his life revolved around his beliefs to a degree not seen among his compatriots, 2) he infused those beliefs with a distinct apocalyptic edge and 3) he was the most socially isolated of all participants, minimizing the influence of countervailing opinions. These findings do not imply that extremist beliefs were absent from the acts of terrorism planned by other participants. But they do suggest that in those cases beliefs fulfilled a less central role as a motive to commit acts of terrorism.

The inability of beliefs alone to explain either involvement in the Hofstadgroup or the planning or perpetration of acts of terrorism by its militant inner circle, was a recurring and distinctly important finding. Even Van Gogh's murderer's violent actions cannot be entirely explained by his fanatical beliefs. The individual level of analysis also revealed the important role of cognitive mechanisms in overcoming psychological boundaries to the use of violence; namely, dehumanization, the attribution of blame to the victims of (intended) violence and

the relegation of personal responsibility to a higher authority. It further pointed to the role of powerful emotions in contributing to the motive for violence; anger brought about by perceived injustice, disappointment in ‘mainstream’ Islam, the deep hurt caused by blasphemy against a beloved religious figure and fear of God’s displeasure in an afterlife.

This latter point is particularly important in understanding why people became involved in the Hofstadgroup, why they adopted and held to extremist convictions and why some of them felt that violence was not only justified by a personal duty. Fear of ending up in the torments of hell for failure to be a ‘true’ Muslim and its obverse, a desire for the rewards of paradise, formed an existential motive that appears to have been at the core of at least several participant’s involvement experience. This existential anxiety led to a quest for answers about what it meant to be a ‘true’ Muslim and, especially among the group’s more militant participants, fed the conviction that jihad was a religious duty that could not be forfeited.

The individual-level analysis also uncovered several factors whose relevance lay in their *inability* to explain involvement processes, in particular the concept of radicalization. Its principal shortcoming was the finding that the majority of participants with radical or extremist views did *not* act on them. Similarly, participation in the Hofstadgroup did not stem from psychopathology and there were no *diagnosed* signs of ‘minor’ mental health problems. Neither did identity-related alienation offer a convincing explanation for involvement. The one personality-related factor of relevance was the discovery of several predisposing risk factors that appeared to make involvement in the group’s extremist inner-circle more likely. These were adventure-seeking, identification with victims of perceived injustice and a history of violent behavior.

The findings outlined in the previous paragraphs address the main research question by highlighting those factors that were most important to understanding the involvement processes of Hofstadgroup participants. But for a fuller understanding of the how and why of involvement in the Hofstadgroup, and to appreciate the relevance of these findings to the broader typology of European homegrown jihadism, it is necessary to look beyond the findings themselves to their broader implications. How can this study contribute to a better understanding of involvement in European homegrown jihadism?

10.3 Implications for research on European homegrown jihadism

To reiterate a general but important point of departure, it is striking that even in this one group, involvement processes took on a variety of shapes and that involvement was not a singular ‘end state’ but meant different things to different participants. This heterogeneity underlines the difficulty of generalizing about the factors governing involvement in extremism and terrorism.¹⁰²²

1022 For a similar conclusion, see: Fiore Geelhoed, *Purification and resistance: global meanings of Islamic fundamentalism in the Netherlands* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2012), 211-212.

Secondly, the findings emphasize that gaining a comprehensive or holistic understanding of involvement in homegrown jihadism requires a broad analytical perspective that utilizes multiple levels of analysis. No one explanation or level of analysis offered a sufficient account for involvement in the Hofstadgroup. From this follows the first of seven key implications; namely, that the relative importance of particular factors to the involvement process is liable to change over time.

10.3.1 The ‘driving force’ of involvement processes is liable to change

The findings illustrated that the factors which *led* to involvement in the Hofstadgroup were frequently different from those that *sustained* it, which in turn differed from those that triggered some participants to plan or actually carry out a terrorist attack. Van Gogh’s murderer, for instance, reoriented himself on his beliefs after time spent in prison and the death of his mother. His involvement process was sustained and catalyzed by the like-minded individuals he met, principally among them Abu Khaled, whose teaching influenced his burgeoning radicalism. The murder itself draws attention to yet another set of influential factors; among them the killer’s violence-prone personality, his belief that murder in the name of his religion was justified and mandated, and a deep-seated desire to avoid his god’s displeasure and achieve a favorable place in the afterlife.

Another participant’s involvement process began after experiencing job-market discrimination. Without an internship to complete his studies, he had large amounts of time on his hands, some of which he spent at his local mosque, talking with people he may otherwise have neglected. Through one of those people he was introduced to the Hofstadgroup. Once there, it was not the radical or extremist ideas being discussed that bound him to the group, but the sense of friendship he experienced. Only *after* becoming involved did he begin to internalize the extremist beliefs that his newfound friends discussed. His intention to plan an actual attack was predicated on different factors still. One of these was a propaganda video in which a Muslim woman who resembled his mother was mistreated by Israeli soldiers. Another was the murder of Van Gogh, which this participant saw as highly inspirational because it was perpetrated by a close friend. It also made him feel it was now his turn to show his commitment to shared values and carry out an attack of his own.

Numerous other examples could be given that would illustrate a similar process. What they underline is that what could be termed the ‘driving force’ behind an individual’s participation process is likely to shift over time. For instance, in the second example structural factors (discrimination against people of Moroccan descent) precipitated the involvement process, group-level factors sustained it (the social benefits of group membership) and a mix of individual and group-level factors (vicarious injustice and emulation of role models) contributed to this individual’s desire to plan a terrorist attack.

In her research on Italian and German left-wing terrorism, Della Porta found that different stages of the involvement process are governed by different levels of analysis.¹⁰²³ The present study reiterates this conclusion for the European homegrown jihadist typology of terrorism. It adds two further points. First, a multicausal, multilevel and *dynamic* perspective on involvement processes in extremist and terrorist groups is a prerequisite for an accurate analysis of how and why participation comes about and is sustained. Secondly, even within a single extremist or terrorist group, the 'driving force' of involvement processes can differ markedly between participants. For instance, whereas one individual may be drawn towards extremism by geopolitical events, another's entry in such a milieu may be primarily motivated by a personal crisis or preexisting friendships.

10.3.2 Involvement in extremist and terrorist groups takes various forms

Not only are involvement processes in general characterized by a continuously shifting emphasis on particular explanatory variables, but the shape of these processes is likely to have distinct characteristics that vary between individual participants. Research is beginning to place considerable emphasis on the variety of roles and positions that members of extremist and terrorist groups may occupy.¹⁰²⁴ Not all participants in such groups are directly involved in acts of terrorist violence; in fact, most will be preoccupied with questions of logistics, propaganda or recruitment. Appreciating the variety and fluidity of involvement processes even within one particular extremist or terrorist group is crucial to understanding how roles within such organizations are allocated.

Indeed, one question raised in the introduction and returned to throughout the manuscript was what differentiated those Hofstadgroup participants who used terrorist violence or planned to do so from those that did not. Although no conclusive or broadly generalizable answer to this question was found, the use of a multicausal and multilevel analytical framework did reveal several noteworthy partial explanations. These included the fact that only Van Gogh's murderer had a history of violent behavior, giving him a proven ability to match words with deeds, and that he adhered his extremist beliefs more fanatically than his compatriots. Particularly strong identification with Muslim victims of war across the globe and a personal hatred toward elements of the Dutch state were key elements setting apart a second individual in the group's extremist inner-circle from the majority of participants who (apparently) did not plan to use actual violence.

Additionally, this research has highlighted that involvement in extremist and terrorist groups should not be seen as having a singular end-state. Not all of those who became involved in the Hofstadgroup actually remained a part of it. In fact, several people chose to distance themselves from the group for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, those who did remain a part of the group

1023 Della Porta, *Social movements*, 10.

1024 Nesser, "Joining jihadi terrorist cells in Europe," 87-114; Bloom, Gill, and Horgan, "Tiocfaid ár Mná," 67-70; Gill and Horgan, "Who were the volunteers?," 451-453.

displayed varying degrees of commitment to the religious convictions and political goals that formed the group's shared interests and worldview. It would be interesting for future research to look more closely at the differences between those participants in extremists groups that do use terrorist violence and those that do not.

10.3.3 The nature of the group shapes the involvement experience

A third key implication is that the nature of the group itself directly influences the involvement experience. Most important in this regard were the Hofstadgroup's lack of ideological and operational leaders and the virtual absence of communal efforts to achieve terrorism-related goals until the very end of its existence. There was never a particularly clear 'Hofstadgroup ideology' to which participants were socialized, creating a relative tolerance for divergent views. In addition to the Salafi-Jihadist majority, the group also contained ideological extremists who gave it sect-like qualities and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, a small number of participants without clearly radical or extremist religious views or a complete lack of interest in religion altogether. Crucially, the absence of operational leaders meant that the development of terrorism-related plans was ad-hoc and highly dependent on the initiative of individual participants.

These characteristics hampered the Hofstadgroup's development into a more ideologically homogeneous and action-oriented entity. It never became a structured organization and only began to resemble a loosely-constituted network by the end of its existence. For the largest part of its 2002-2005 existence, it remained a *group* of friends and acquaintances, spread over several cities. As a result of this organizational ambiguity, Hofstadgroup participants were left with a degree of ideological and operational freedom that placed a premium on their own initiative. Had participants found themselves in an actual *organization* or *network* with clear leaders, one that tolerated no dissent from a particular worldview and that communally planned and executed terrorist attacks, their involvement experience would have been quite different. This finding suggests that in order to account for how and why participation in European homegrown jihadism comes about, the characteristics of the group in question form a set of contextual factors that cannot be overlooked.

10.3.4 Fanaticism rather than radicalization

This study found that 'radicalization' and its frequently implied link between radical beliefs and radical behavior was unable to provide a satisfactory account for participation in the Hofstadgroup. Primarily, it could not explain why of the numerous Salafi-Jihadist extremists, only a very small minority acted or planned to act on those beliefs. Secondly, the findings undermined the linear and deterministic notions frequently found in radicalization thinking. Some participants became involved in the group *before* adopting radical or extremist views, a number of them never went beyond 'merely' radical views and several participants disengaged even though they had previously held extremist views.

None of which is to say that beliefs are not important to understanding involvement in homegrown jihadism. A shared set of core beliefs was the basis for the Hofstadgroup's formation and allowed a dichotomous and militant view of the world to take hold. Furthermore, beliefs were crucial motivational components of the planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism. Just as important was their ability to *justify* the use of violence. But fundamental as beliefs are to understanding involvement in European homegrown jihadism, they are clearly incapable of accounting for participation in and of themselves. Radicalization has been the preeminent explanation for involvement in terrorism for more than a decade. This makes its overemphasis on the degree to which radical beliefs can motivate violent behavior all the more problematic.

For a more accurate understanding of involvement in terrorism to emerge, the concept of radicalization needs to be reexamined. An alternative way of studying the role that extremist beliefs can play in motivating terrorist violence was found in Taylor's concept of fanaticism.¹⁰²⁵ A crucial difference between the concepts of radicalization and fanaticism is that the latter is specific enough to explain why merely holding extremist beliefs is insufficient to explain the turn to violence. Fanaticism emphasizes the role of contextual factors, such as the degree to which extremist beliefs are challenged by contradictory points of view, in increasing the likeliness that the internalization of such beliefs will result in violent behavior. This makes it a theoretically and empirically robust alternative to 'radicalization' whose utility should be further explored in future research.

10.3.5 Involvement as personal expression rather than strategic calculation

Although terrorism is frequently understood as a form of violence that is utilized to achieve specific (political) aims, such instrumental or strategic considerations were virtually absent among Hofstadgroup participants. Instead, the motives underlying the planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism had a distinct *personal* edge; affirming the perpetrator's identity as a 'true' Muslim, avenging the Muslim community, claiming retribution for insults and pain suffered personally and avoiding god's displeasure through a commitment to violent jihad. This latter point in particular was found to have exerted a strong influence on several participants; fear of hell and a desire for paradise sustained both involvement in the group and adherence to extremist views. These powerful emotions also appeared to factor into several inner-circle extremists' decisions to use terrorist violence. Although it arose in part as a response to worldly issues such as the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror, participation in the Hofstadgroup was primarily a vehicle for finding, embracing and expressing a newfound identity as 'true' Muslims.

As such, understanding why people become involved in European homegrown jihadism, and in preparations for actual attacks, may be less about asking what they are hoping to *achieve* than it is about who or what they are hoping to *be*. This is not to argue that participants such as

1025 Taylor, *The fanatics*.

those found in the Hofstadgroup's militant core never considered strategic issues, because they did. The point is that their desire to 'do something' in response to what they perceived to be Western aggression against Muslims or the insidious machinations of apostate regimes, was more about taking action than about whether or not those actions stood a chance of actually achieving something. Provided this finding can be replicated, it argues for a subtle reconsideration of the motives driving participation in European homegrown jihadism.

10.3.6 No victimization or psychopathology

Terrorists are frequently portrayed as psychopathological or as people who embrace violence after becoming victimized, for instance by political oppression, socioeconomic inequality or discrimination. With the exception of discrimination, which played a *supportive* role in sustaining some participants' involvement in the group and which strengthened their dichotomous worldview, none of these factors were found to have influenced involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Perhaps most surprising given its prominence in the literature, the research found little support for the hypothesis that identity-related alienation played a significant role in motivating or sustaining involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Neither did socioeconomic deprivation offer a convincing explanation for involvement; the group's participants came from a variety of backgrounds. Only a very small minority could be objectively labeled as unemployed or (relatively) uneducated.

Just as it can make intuitive sense to see homegrown jihadists as people who have in some way been victimized, it can be comforting to think of people who embrace extremist ideas or even participate in terrorist violence as individuals suffering from mental health problems. Yet the lack of empirical support for such positions found in this research, and echoed in the broader literature, should function as a caution against this line of reasoning. It may very well be that future clinical evaluations of homegrown jihadists will reveal that mental health problems do indeed offer explanations for their behavior. At present, however, attempts to explain involvement in the Hofstadgroup or homegrown jihadism more broadly as stemming from mental health problems can count on little to no empirical support.

What these results have to offer for an understanding of involvement in homegrown jihadism more broadly, is a warning against intuitively convincing but empirically poorly-supported explanations. Extremism and terrorism are subjects far too complex to be adequately explained by the 'crazy or victimized' dichotomy. Only through nuanced analysis and empirical validation of assumptions can our understanding of involvement in this form of political violence be significantly advanced.

10.3.7 The often-overlooked role of chance

A final research-relevant implication centers on the role of chance. In the study of war, chance and luck are understood to be factors that can exert a tremendous influence on the development

and outcome of conflicts.¹⁰²⁶ Within the context of terrorism studies, however, these elements are seldom mentioned. This is surprising, as research on the backgrounds of terrorists has indicated that happenstance can play an important role in bringing about involvement. This study finds support for this point of view. The vast majority of participants did not make a conscious decision to become involved in the Hofstadgroup. More often than not their participation came about through people they happened to know or meet. The role of such chance encounters should also serve to demystify the involvement process. Participation in the Hofstadgroup was frequently not a conscious decision made by Islamist radicals and extremist with a view toward organizing for violence, but a much more unintentional process based on happenstance and a tenuous shared commitment to Salafi-Jihadist views.

10.4 Policy-relevant implications

With regard to policy-relevant implications, the study supports the notion that seeing involvement in terrorism as the result of underlying 'root causes' such as poverty, discrimination or radicalization is a dead end. No single factor has such explanatory potential. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the involvement process, more options for prevention, or for the reintegration of convicted offenders, can be identified. By focusing on more than radical and extremist beliefs, practitioners can develop interventions aimed at other aspects of the involvement process. For instance, the role played by the various attractions of group membership suggests not only the potential value of taking people from this social environment but also the need to provide them with alternatives that similarly offer benefits such as camaraderie and a positive self-image.

Another potential avenue for preventing involvement or recidivism is taking seriously the perceived injustice and altruism that drives some of these individuals. As factually incorrect or uncomfortable as we may find the idea that Western intervention in Muslim countries equates with a war against Islam that justifies retaliatory violence, such ideas have considerable potential to motivate involvement and for that reason alone should be taken seriously. Because of the popularity of the radicalization concept, homegrown jihadist groups are frequently understood in terms of their religious convictions. What the results presented here have suggested, is that the motives both for involvement in these groups and the commission of acts of terrorism can be distinctly worldly; real or vicariously experienced *political grievances* tied to events in the Muslim world are a key explanatory factor. Interventions could focus on channeling the altruistic desire to help others that often lies at heart of these perceptions into non-violent avenues.

Another policy-relevant aspect of this thesis lies in its use of police files as primary sources. Although using police files for research purposes presents its own set of challenges, being able to access this material was a prerequisite for coming to a more empirically robust understanding of participants' involvement processes. They were thus indispensable to moving beyond the

1026 Carl Von Clausewitz, *On war* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), 101, 138-140.

overreliance on secondary sources noted earlier as a longstanding issue in research on terrorism. The point is that this is not only a benefit for the academic community. As potential end-users of research on terrorism, policy makers and counterterrorism practitioners have a stake in ensuring that research is of the highest possible quality. It is to be hoped that the authorities in the Netherlands and other countries will recognize the importance of allowing researchers access to sources of information such as police files.

10.5 Limitations and future research

In closing, it is valuable to acknowledge this study's limitations and the various avenues for future research. One particular limitation is that the thesis focused almost exclusively on proximate factors; those *directly* influencing involvement in the Hofstadgroup. It has largely remained unclear, for instance, what underlying factors made this group's participants more likely than other young Dutch Muslims to experience cognitive openings that in many cases led to their involvement. Why were others not similarly affected by images of 9/11 or Muslim suffering? Secondly, the study focused primarily on the Hofstadgroup itself rather than the broader social, cultural and political environment from which it emerged. There is considerable room for research on the role of underlying factors in bringing about involvement, as well as the relationship between the Hofstadgroup and the broader environment from which it emerged.

The single case-study research design remains this thesis' foremost limitation. A comparative approach was not taken because the emphasis placed on gathering and utilizing primary sources, and the in-depth qualitative nature of the analysis, would then simply not have been feasible within any reasonable amount of time. Nevertheless, it is argued that the findings presented in these pages are relevant not just for the Hofstadgroup itself but for the broader typology of European homegrown jihadism it represents. The Hofstadgroup was one of several similar groups that arose in other European countries in the early 2000s. Furthermore, single case-study research designs are useful for empirically assessing the validity of explanations held to be of general applicability, such as 'radicalization'. By critically and empirically examining numerous commonly-found explanations for involvement in terrorism, the thesis was able to make a contribution to the larger debate about how to understand and study involvement in extremist and terrorist groups.

That being said, a fruitful avenue for future research would be to apply the multi-level analysis for understanding involvement to a wider selection of cases. Comparative research would be useful for distinguishing between factors of general relevance to the (European) homegrown jihadist typology and those unique to particular cases. As previously noted, such research could also usefully focus on what distinguishes those participants of extremist groups that do use (or plan to use) terrorist violence from those that do not. Can differences in their backgrounds, personality characteristics or involvement processes be identified that can explain how and why some take up violent roles in such groups while others do not?

Another methodological limitation lies in the utilization of multiple theories spread over three levels of analysis. While the choice for breadth over depth provided a valuable appreciation of the multifaceted nature of involvement processes, it arguably did a disservice to the individual explanations. After all, many of them are sufficiently nuanced and well-developed to warrant chapters or even entire studies of their own. Future research could turn this emphasis on its head and study particular hypotheses in more depth.

The primary sources utilized here form both a unique strong point and a weakness. The police files and interviews with former participants in particular offered a wealth of detailed information, much of it never before utilized in research on the Hofstadgroup. While such primary sources are of fundamental importance to reaching an empirically supported understanding of involvement processes, they also pose several issues. The police files in particular focused primarily on the participants (deemed) the most violent, leaving many others relatively understudied. Similarly, interviews could only be held with the relatively small number of former participants willing to talk. The end-result of both these issues is that a lot is known about some (key) participants while others remain relatively poorly understood.

A more fundamental issue is that these sources are not freely available, hampering the transparency of the claims presented here. Although this issue could not be fully resolved, several measures were taken to minimize its impact. First of all, references to the police files and interviews were complemented with publicly available sources wherever possible. Secondly, links to those parts of the police files that had been leaked to the press and subsequently published online were provided wherever relevant. Finally, readers were asked to keep in mind that the use of restricted information is quite common in the social sciences. Interview transcripts, for instance, are rarely made freely available for reasons of privacy. The primary sources used in this study are thus less of an exception with regard to transparency than might first be apparent.

10.6 Toward a more empirical study of terrorism

Improving our understanding of how and why people become involved in European homegrown jihadism and indeed in terrorism more broadly, requires two things. The first is an analytical approach that recognizes involvement as a process in which numerous and interrelated factors, spread over multiple levels of analysis, play a role. The second are primary sources that allow the researcher to acquire detailed, reliable and new information on the involvement process. By applying both of these elements to a study of the Dutch Hofstadgroup, this thesis has aimed to make a contribution to a better understanding of this particular typology of terrorism. Hopefully, future studies on involvement in homegrown jihadism will similarly be able to utilize primary-sources and thereby gradually but finally overcome one of the oldest obstacles to progress in research on terrorism.

