# Non-involvement in terrorist violence: understanding the most common outcome of radicalization processes

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# Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence: Understanding the Most Common Outcome of Radicalization Processes

**by Bart Schuurman**


## *Abstract*

*This article argues that to better understand involvement in terrorism, research needs to focus on why most extremists will never actually commit such violence. It starts from the premise that involvement in terrorist violence is an unlikely outcome of radicalization processes. The dramatic and violent nature of terrorist attacks can obscure the fact that most individuals who adopt extremist views will refrain from acting in support of their convictions altogether, or do so in essentially non-violent ways such as through fundraising or the dissemination of propaganda. The norm of non-involvement in terrorist violence among people radicalized to extremism, offers considerable opportunities for new research directions. This article begins by expanding on why non-involvement in terrorist violence deserves more attention from researchers. It then discusses insights within and beyond the field of terrorism studies that can help explain the differences between violent and non-violent radicalization outcomes. The discussion then turns to some methodological considerations relevant to obtaining a better understanding of non-involvement in terrorist violence among radicalized individuals.*


**Keywords:** non-involvement, terrorism, disaggregation, comparative research; protective factors, non-violence

## *Introduction*

Terrorism is communication through extreme violence, purposefully bloody theatre in which murder is less the principal aim than the means used to draw attention to a cause, a group, or a grievance.[1] In the post-1945 period, non-state terrorists have often succeeded in forcefully grabbing the attention of citizens and governments, even if they seldom achieve the goals they pursue.[2] It has become a cliché to point out that, as a cause of death in Western societies, terrorism ranks far below the more mundane risks posed by traffic, ladders and bathtubs.[3] Other forms of violence, such as domestic abuse and homicide, are far more widespread yet receive a fraction of the attention that politicians and the media allocate to terrorism.[4] At least in part, contemporary terrorism's outsized societal impact stems from the premeditated use of extreme violence, the explicit targeting of civilians and noncombatants and its often purposefully indiscriminate nature. Anyone who represents a broadly defined category of enemies could be a victim and these characteristics imbue terrorism with an ability to simultaneously shock and enrage that ensures it grabs the attention of citizens, politicians and academics.

The gruesome spectacle of terrorist violence invariably draws attention to its perpetrators. Their motives, backgrounds, and personal characteristics have attracted significant scholarly interest since academic research on terrorism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.[5] An early line of work suggested that terrorists were driven to violence by psychiatric conditions such as psychopathy and narcissism.[6] Other such research emphasized developmental issues, suggesting some terrorists externalized deep-seated conflicts with their parents or an inability to live up to societal expectations.[7] Although these findings correspond to the popular view of terrorists as deranged or damaged individuals,[8] they quickly attracted criticism on methodological and empirical grounds.[9] As the study of terrorism grew exponentially in the years following 9/11,[10] much of this early work was criticized, leading to a thesis of terrorists' psychological 'normality' that has itself recently come under scrutiny for lack of nuance.[11] Over the past two decades, the search for causes of terrorism has broadened significantly beyond the individual level of analysis, with researchers considering group and structural-level influences as well.[12]

Following jihadist terrorist attacks in Madrid, Amsterdam and London in the early 2000s, 'radicalization' emerged as the master narrative for understanding the process leading to involvement in terrorism, among academics as well as broader society.[13] The term has stuck, despite uncertainty over its exact meaning and ongoing discussions about whether or not it overemphasizes the role of ideological convictions among the dozens of other potentially relevant variables.[14] In this article, the term radicalization refers to the varied processes that can lead people to participate in radical, extremist or terrorist groups or movements. Its use here is thus not limited to the cognitive interpretation of radicalization that sees it as the adoption of ever more radical, and ultimately extremist, ideological convictions. This broader understanding of radicalization acknowledges that involvement processes are as likely to be driven by a personal search for meaning, belonging, or adventure as they are to be (solely) guided by convictions.[15] Indeed, actual ideological radicalization may follow rather than precede involvement in radical or extremist groups or movements, underlining the importance of looking beyond ideology.[16]

A distinction is also made between radicalism and extremism. Here, the former refers to views and movements that seek far-reaching political or societal change but usually pursue these goals in a non-violent fashion and while remaining by-and-large within the confines set by democratic governance and the rule of law.[17] By contrast, extremism refers to convictions that seek not just change but revolution and (or) explicitly advocate the use of violent means to achieve desired outcomes.[18] One of the downsides of radicalization as a concept is that it implicitly ties radicalism to terrorism, rendering suspect movements and ideas that challenge the status quo in a vocal and perhaps confrontational but usually peaceful manner. As this article goes on to argue, the trajectory from radicalism to terrorism is far less common than is often assumed. To minimize confusion, the phrase 'radicalization to extremism' is used here to clarify the focus on people and movements explicitly in favor of the use of violence.

Fortunately, as the field of terrorism studies matured in recent years, so has radicalization as a concept and our thinking about the factors thought to underlie such processes. Overly reductionist understandings of terrorism stemming from 'root causes' such as poverty or lack of education, the notion that terrorists share particular 'profiles',[19] and the idea that involvement processes are linear and deterministic, have largely been abandoned.[20] Increased use of primary data has provided the greater detail and reliability needed to assess existing explanations for radicalization and develop new ones.[21] Mental health issues have received renewed and more nuanced consideration.[22] Yet, despite this progress, and despite the attention that terrorism continues to demand as a societal threat, our ability to explain how and why people become involved in it, other than retrospectively on a case-by-case basis, remains limited.

One of the key challenges remains understanding why the majority of people who radicalize to extremism never come to participate in the planning, preparation or commission of terrorist attacks.[23] The extreme violence at the heart of terrorism and its ability to have long-lasting adverse effects on societies, naturally draws attention to those who wield it. But for every person who committed terrorist violence on behalf of al-Qaeda, the IRA or the National Socialist Underground, hundreds if not thousands of others did not, despite sharing similarly extremist worldviews, peer groups and comparable socioeconomic backgrounds.[24] Unlike the literatures on civil war and insurgencies, terrorism studies has spent relatively little attention on this variation of the 'collective action problem'.[25] It is still largely unclear why most people who radicalize to extremism are content to 'freeride' on the violent militancy committed by a small group of their ideological compatriots.[26] By focusing predominantly on cases of radicalization leading to terrorist violence and underemphasizing those where it did not, the field has struggled to make sense of a key distinction in the outcome of radicalization processes.[27] This not only hampers our ability to isolate the most relevant factors for understanding involvement in terrorist violence, it also limits our knowledge of the protective factors that may keep those who radicalize to extremism from crossing this ultimate threshold.

### *Challenges to Understanding Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence*

A core issue that many attempts to understand involvement in terrorist violence face, is that they have done so by selecting on the dependent variable. In other words, trying to explain why people commit terrorist attacks by studying only the perpetrators of such attacks. Of course, analyses of those at the sharp end of radicalization have much to offer and have yielded a range of relevant insights.[28] But trying to understand involvement in terrorist violence by looking only at actual perpetrators of such crimes obscures exactly those counter-examples of non-violent radicalization necessary to bring to light what sets both apart in terms of personal background characteristics, involvement-process dynamics and the influence of group as well as structural-level variables.[29] Within the set of individuals who radicalize to extremism, what sets apart those who engage in terrorist violence from those who do not?

As a result of this overemphasis on perpetrators of terrorist violence, existing explanations for involvement in terrorism, as well as risk assessment tools intended to help practitioners detect and prevent terrorism and radicalization to extremism, suffer from a specificity problem.[30] This is the challenge of explaining why, for instance, only one or two members of extremist groups will actually turn to terrorist violence, despite the characteristics of these individuals' backgrounds and involvement dynamics being shared by a much larger portion of group members.[31] The specificity problem is what makes it unwise to rely on 'root causes' such as poverty or discrimination, as there will always be many more individuals who did not turn to extremism, let alone actual terrorism, despite exposure to similar conditions.[32] It is at the heart of the problem with interpretations of radicalization that see the adoption of increasingly extremist convictions as leading to terrorist violence, because there will always be many more people who espouse extremist views without acting on them.[33]

Tackling the specificity problem is key to a better understanding of the differences between violent and non-violent radicalization outcomes. To do so, three specific challenges need to be overcome. The first of these concerns how radicalization and involvement in terrorism are conceptualized.[34] As several authors have argued, radicalizing to extremism and actually engaging in terrorist violence are two related but separate processes that need to be – but have often not been – explained independently.[35] Radicalization is not predetermined to lead to extremism, let alone involvement in terrorism or other forms of political violence.[36] Many people who radicalize will not go beyond the adoption of radical points of view (i.e. usually non-violent and seeking change but not revolution). Similarly, participation in non-violent activism, such as demonstrations or attempts to gain political influence through electoral politics, seem far more likely outcomes than involvement in terrorism. Moreover, for a considerable number of people who radicalize, radical or extremist ideologies' attraction is not so much their use as a blueprint for collective action, but as a source of individual and group identity.[37] Their goal is not to 'do something' but to 'be someone', underscoring that radicalization may be as much about meaning-making as it is about achieving political or social change.

Just as radicalization processes are better seen as having a multitude of possible outcomes than simply propelling people towards terrorism, so too should those outcomes themselves be disaggregated. While involvement in terrorism is often conflated with the execution of terrorist attacks, this is actually only one of several 'organizational roles' available.[38] Terrorist organizations or cells are likely to have as many if not more individuals in non-violent 'support' positions related to logistics, recruitment, propaganda or finances. There are also likely to be participants who are best classified as simple 'hangers-on' with limited interest in actually doing anything. Acknowledging the multi-finality of radicalization outcomes and the numerous forms that involvement in terrorism can take, is a first step towards a better understanding of what combinations of personal background factors and radicalization-process dynamics shape the key distinction between violent and non-violent outcomes.[39] While there has been a promising push towards disaggregating what it means to be radicalized or involved in terrorism, this research direction deserves to gain more traction in the years to come.[40]

A closely related second issue standing in the way of a better understanding of why most people who radicalize to extremism will not actually become involved in terrorism, is the dearth of comparative research designs within terrorism studies.[41] While more carefully conceptualizing the different forms that radicalization and involvement in terrorism can take is a crucial first step, explaining those differences will require a range of comparative studies to be undertaken. There is plenty of potential. For instance, by studying broad differences in radicalization outcomes, such as between those individuals who become involved in violent extremism in some shape or form (i.e. as recruiters, propagandists, violence users, etc.) and those who do not. It would also be fascinating to further develop work that teases apart role adoption or allocation within extremist and terrorist groups to better understand why some persons will, for instance, advocate political violence but not use it themselves.[42] Key insights may also be gained from making comparisons between different forms of violent extremist movements. Why, for instance, does the long-term trend among European right-wing extremists show a decline in the use of deadly violence while the opposite is true in the United States for the 2000s and 2010s?[43] While comparative research designs are not entirely absent from terrorism studies, their potential has hardly begun to be utilized.[44]

Carrying out such comparisons effectively means surmounting a third challenge. Like participation in other forms of crime, radicalization pathways and terrorist-involvement patterns will be characterized by specific combinations of both risk and protective factors.[45] The partial mitigation of risk factors by protective factors may be an important explanation why only some people within an extremist organization will actually turn convictions into violence. In recent years we have begun to see protective factors feature more prominently in research on terrorism and radicalization, although to different degrees.[46] At the same time, the literature points to ongoing issues with the limited empirical validation of both risk and protective factors.[47] It also conveys a sense that much more work needs to be done to maximize our understanding of the role that protective factors play in accounting for different radicalization outcomes and role-adoption patterns in terrorist groups.[48] Studying users of terrorist violence and the risk factors associated with their behavior has certainly proven useful, yet further progress may depend on coming at this problem from a still largely unexplored angle. What keeps most extremists from engaging in the terrorist violence that they support in words but not deeds? Can attention for protective as well as risk factors help explain such non-involvement in terrorist violence?

### *A Multidisciplinary Perspective on Risk and Protective Factors*

Studying extremists' non-involvement in terrorist violence does not have to start from scratch. There is increasing attention within terrorism studies for this subject, and a large body of work in adjacent disciplines that can offer useful insights. The growing number of studies on protective factors for terrorism point to a range of elements, including the importance of family and friends who are not involved in extremism, having numerous social contacts, having family obligations, older age, apathy or the sense that change is not possible, the presence of non-violent alternatives for pursuing change, perceived strategic ineffectiveness of terrorism, a measured government response to protest, and fear of the personal costs of militancy (e.g. arrest, death, loss of income).[49] Others note the protective influence of a stable employment history, the importance of pro-social support systems such as school, and the risk-attenuating effects of a stable upbringing in which parents provide both affection and active involvement in a child's development.[50] Research also underlines the importance of self-esteem, the ability to empathize with others, interacting with diverse groups of people, and the ability to deal with ambiguity.[51] Notable is the emphasis given to the dampening influence of high self-control.[52]

These examples (see [53] for more complete overviews) illustrate that protective factors can take a variety of forms. Some relate to individual characteristics such as age and cognitive style, others stem from upbringing, social networks and systemic elements such as opportunities for achieving change through non-violent means. Complementing this empirically-oriented work are a number of more theoretical contributions, such as Dutter's argument that the 'non-development of an ethos of political violence or armed struggle' was an important element limiting the development of separatist terrorism in Quebec.[54] The importance of looking

at the internal dynamics of protest movements, rebellions and terrorist groups is underlined by Busher et al., who propose several internal brakes on violent escalation that include seeing violence as morally indefensible or strategically ineffective.[55] Clearly, risk and protective factors for terrorist violence are not just found at an individual level, but may also be present within the group or broader movement in which people radicalized to extremism come to participate.[56] Turning to terrorist violence or not may depend on what type of organization or movement is joined and whether an individual is subsequently socialized to see violence as effective and justified or not.[57]

Beyond this terrorism-specific literature, there are years of relevant scholarship in adjacent disciplines such as criminology and psychology. Criminologists in particular have long been studying how various kinds of protective factors impact an individual's likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior in the short and long-term.[58] Beyond a wealth of empirical work on risk and protective factors, the discipline also offers a useful conceptual distinction between a *promotive* factor as 'a variable that [predicts] a low probability of offending' and a *protective* factor as 'a variable that interacts with a risk factor to nullify its effect'.[59] The first may be most relevant to understanding how and why certain people are more likely to be attracted to extremism while the latter may have more to say about assessing the likelihood of turning to terrorist violence among those already radicalized to extremism. Longitudinal studies have been quite consistent in pointing to the promotive effects of a stable home life, commitment to school, pro-social peers et cetera.[60] Similarly, work on criminal gangs notes that the risks of involvement are lower for young people with strong familial ties.[61] Another relevant insight from criminology is that risk factors can be stacked, thus increasing the likelihood of delinquent behavior and, arguably, diminishing the mitigating influences of any protective factors in place.[62]

Criminology clearly has much to offer for the study of (non-)involvement in terrorist violence.[63] The same applies to work on involvement processes and the dynamics governing the use of violence in related phenomena, such as civil wars, criminal gangs, (youth) violence more generally, the military, and the gender-dynamics present across these domains.[64] There is much to be gained by looking beyond the boundaries set by terrorism studies' core journals, but a broad approach to the literature is no panacea. Despite the greater attention given to the role of protective factors in criminology, that discipline also appears to have favored a risk-factor based approach until relatively recently, particularly in areas relevant to the study of terrorism such as forensic medicine and risk assessment.[65] Especially for those protective factors (and certainly also risk factors) beginning to be linked to radicalization to extremism and involvement in terrorist violence, it needs to be remembered that many lack strong empirical validation.[66] Hence the divergent conclusions reached about, for instance, the relationship between religiosity and radicalization to extremism or the role of strong social ties.[67] While adjacent fields and topics of study have much to offer research on (non-) involvement in terrorism, there are few ready-made answers to be found.

## *Methodological Considerations*

There are several methodological issues to keep in mind when researching non-involvement in terrorism among individuals radicalized to extremism. The first of these is finding and accessing sufficiently detailed biographical information. While perpetrators of deadly terrorist attacks often become the subjects of detailed case studies and extensive reporting (e.g. Anders Breivik), there is little publicly available information on extremists who did not engage in terrorism. Requesting access to police information or applying for permission to interview persons convicted of non-violent terrorism-related offenses are certainly alternatives, but distinctly time-consuming ones. Fortunately, there are numerous (auto-)biographies of former extremists and a growing number of 'formers' who may be suitable as interviewees and whose public profiles make them easy to find. Although extremists who did not become involved in terrorism will be more difficult to locate, the fact that they did not commit such crimes, and have probably not been exposed to much media attention previously, will likely make them more willing to work with researchers. Another possibility here is to prioritize historical cases, in the sense of ones that have progressed through the courts and concern people or movements no

longer at the forefront of militancy, as this is likely to make access to material and interviewees easier, and has the added benefit of addressing the field's overwhelming focus on contemporary issues and developments.[68]

Another option is to focus on individuals prosecuted as members of terrorist organizations but who did not actually contribute to the planning, preparation or execution of an actual attack. In theory, it should be relatively straightforward to distinguish between violence users and, for instance, recruiters or propagandists. In practice, the boundaries between various roles are often blurred, especially within groups with ambiguous organizational structures.[69] Another difficulty here is that preemptive arrests always leave a degree of uncertainty as to whether those individuals who seemed intent to carry out attacks would actually have done so, especially as bragging and fantasizing about violence is a common feature in extremist groups. A solution here would be to operationalize Taylor and Horgan's distinction between involvement and event decisions.[70] For example, while all participants in terrorist groups have made involvement decisions, to qualify as having made an event decision (i.e. a decision to engage in terrorist violence) participants need to have demonstrated clear intent, involvement in planning and preparatory activities (e.g. target selection, logistics) and access to weapons. Such an approach certainly won't remove all ambiguity from the distinction between those involved in terrorist violence and those who are not. But it can provide a basis for broadening case selection of people in the 'involved in terrorist violence' category beyond those caught red-handed on their way to carry out an attack, which will always be a relatively small group.

Alongside acquiring relevant data, there is the question of how to assess it. Although biographical information will be essential to piece together radicalization processes and involvement trajectories, it is vital to broaden the analysis beyond the individual him- or herself. As Bouhana argues, terrorism is something that people do but it cannot be explained simply by looking at individuals; the (physical) context and its myriad influences must be considered as well.[71] A better grasp of (non-) involvement in terrorist violence requires the use of multiple analytical perspectives, including the structural (e.g. socio-economic and (geo)political context), the group or movement level (e.g. socialization processes, role of peer pressures) and the individual level of analysis (e.g. grievances, ideological conviction, views on utility of violence).[72]

Another aspect to keep in mind here, is the importance of taking a longitudinal perspective on the influence that these various factors exert on radicalization and involvement processes. That is, not to take a snapshot of, for instance, terrorists at the moment they were arrested, but to consider how present behavior was shaped by past influences, especially as research shows risk factors are liable to 'stack' over time and persist even if the original cause has abated (e.g. victims of childhood abuse are likely to experience its effects long after the abuse itself has ended).[73] Such a process-oriented analysis is key to identifying changes in the configuration of risk and protective factors that characterize violent and non-violent outcomes of radicalization processes. It may well be that what sets perpetrators of terrorist violence apart is not a greater number of risk factors, but the disappearance of protective influences over time. Attention for the dynamic nature of radicalization and involvement processes will be crucial to gaining greater clarity on what distinguishes those who become involved in terrorist violence from the majority of extremists that does not.

## *Conclusion*

This article has argued that a better understanding of why and how some people become involved in terrorist violence requires this question to be flipped on its head. By studying what keeps the majority of people who radicalize to extremism from involvement in terrorist attacks, the academic community stands to make significant progress on a subject that has been at the heart of the field's debates for decades. Fortunately, the multi-finality of radicalization outcomes, and the various forms that involvement in terrorism can take, has already begun to draw researchers' attention. Likewise, there is an uptick in comparative studies and greater attention for the influence exerted by protective as well as risk factors. While there is clearly a significant way to go before the field's specificity problem has been adequately addressed, that is the tendency to understand

involvement in terrorist violence by only studying actual perpetrators of such attacks, it seems warranted to expect research projects undertaken in this area to yield important contributions in the years to come.

Exploring what sets apart radicalization trajectories that lead to involvement in terrorist violence from those that do not, has clear benefits for the work of counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners as well. Clearer insights into the protective factors that may dissuade participation in this form of political violence can empower prevention work and help curb recidivism among those convicted of terrorism-related offenses.[74] The corollary is a clearer picture of the background factors and involvement dynamics more likely to apply to those who do turn to terrorist violence. This type of information will be beneficial to police and intelligence agencies working to detect and prevent terrorist plots from reaching maturity - agencies which will often need to identify the most high-risk individuals within a larger group of suspects.[75] Given this potential, studying non-involvement in terrorist violence may be one of the most promising ways of pushing the boundaries of knowledge on a form of political violence that has given few signs of abating as a significant societal threat.

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