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A group affair: understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali

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Chapter 2 – Research on involvement in terrorism

2.1 Introduction

Terrorist attacks generally lead to the question: ‘Why?’ Why did this happen? Why did this person kill so many people? The answer to the question of why individuals become involved in terrorism can be summarized as being the outcome of “a complex process in which multiple factors play a role”.⁸⁴ That is why this research adopts a multilevel analytical framework to understand how people become involved in terrorism. In this framework, theoretical explanations from diverse fields, including criminology, (social) psychology, and sociology will be discussed, structured along the lines of a micro, meso, and macro level of analysis to explaining involvement in terrorism. This approach is endorsed by the academic body of literature.⁸⁵ According to psychiatrist and terrorism researcher Jessica Stern: “[humans] catch the fire of terrorism in myriad ways – some environmental, some individual (or more likely, in most cases, a mix of the two).”⁸⁶

Aside from the academic value of taking an interdisciplinary approach to the topic of involvement in terrorism; this approach also does justice to the linkages that are often observed in reality between terrorism and other forms of crime such as all narco-, arms and human trafficking, money laundering, and immigration violations.⁸⁷ The regional linkages in Mali and the Sahel between organised crime and terrorism⁸⁸ represent an example of Shelley’s theory of the “unholy trinity” between terrorism, organised crime, and corruption.⁸⁹ According to Shelley, newer transnational criminal groups share common interests with terrorist groups and profit from state economic development and poor governance, “porous borders and dysfunctional state institutions.”⁹⁰ In line with the observed overlap in organized criminal and terrorist interests, this thesis starts from the assumption that factors that play a role in individual involvement with terrorist groups might have been just as much influenced by this larger criminal context rather than being the mere result of considerations related specifically to terrorism as ideologically-driven violence.

⁸⁴ Tore Bjørgo, *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward* (Routledge, 2004); John Horgan, ‘Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective’, in *Mapping Terrorism Research* (Routledge, 2006), 120–40; Max Taylor and John Horgan, ‘A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585–601.

⁸⁵ Martha Crenshaw, “The psychology of political terrorism”, *Political psychology* 21, nr. 2 (1986): 380; Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent radicalisation in Europe: What we know and what we do not know”, 810; Horgan, “Understanding terrorist motivation: A socio-psychological perspective”, 13–14; Rex A. Hudson, “The sociology and psychology of terrorism: Who becomes a terrorist and why?” (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WASHINGTON DC FEDERAL RESEARCH DIV, 1999), 15, 23; Clark McCauley en Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of political radicalisation: Pathways toward terrorism”, *Terrorism and political violence* 20, nr. 3 (2008): 429; Jeffrey Ian Ross, “A model of the psychological causes of oppositional political terrorism”, *Peace and Conflict* 2, nr. 2 (1996): 129; Gregory D. Miller, “Rationality, decision-making and the levels of analysis problem in terrorism studies”, in *ISA’s 50th Annual Convention ‘Exploring the past, anticipating the future’*, New York, 2009, 3–4; Tinka Veldhuis en Jørgen Staun, *Islamist radicalisation: A root cause model* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael The Hague, 2009), 22; Joshua Sinai, “New trends in terrorism studies: strengths and weaknesses”, in *Mapping terrorism research* (Routledge, 2006), 46–47.

⁸⁶ Jessica Stern, ‘Response to Marc Sageman’s “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 607.

⁸⁷ Vincenzo Ruggiero, ‘Hybrids: On the Crime–Terror Nexus’, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 2017, 6.

⁸⁸ Erik Alda and Joseph Sala, ‘Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region’, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3, no. 1 (2014).

⁸⁹ Louise Shelley, ‘The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2004): 101–11.

⁹⁰ Shelley, 104–5.

A persistent characteristic of terrorism research is the attempt (implicit or otherwise) to emphasise how violent extremist behaviour is different or *special*.⁹¹ As a result, a specific body of literature on terrorism has emerged with its own terminology. Though it has been argued that terrorism is special because it is an anomaly statistically speaking as well as from a societal perspective,⁹² terrorist behaviour is governed by the many socio-psychological dynamics that underpin all human behaviour.⁹³ However, terrorism studies have often failed to incorporate useful insights from other disciplines, as many terrorism scholars have attempted to “construct terrorism as a separate and unique category of political violence, which required its own specialized approaches and dedicated scholars.”⁹⁴ Additionally, even though numerous studies in academic disciplines ranging from (social) psychology to criminology and sociology have focused on the same themes, “exceptionalism regarding terrorism oftentimes see researchers “reinventing the wheel” in terms of explanatory frameworks for political violence”.⁹⁵

Parallels can be drawn between the profiles of criminals and violent extremist offenders on the grounds that they are usually rationally acting, lower-middle class males.⁹⁶ From the emergence of identity gangs in prison to the role of prison as a cathartic event, this literature is underutilised in the case of violent extremism and radicalisation research due in large part to the exceptionalisation of terrorist offending.⁹⁷ That is why in this thesis terrorism is viewed as a subset of the larger phenomenon of political violence – which is in itself a subset of criminal behaviour. This research seeks to draw on the well-established and empirically grounded literature that informs our view of crime – generally understood – in an effort to analyse involvement in terrorism.

2.2 Taking a multilevel approach

The current body of academic literature provides a starting point in understanding involvement in terrorism. Nonetheless, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to primary-source based studies that detail the role of factors on the individual, the group or the structural level that either contribute to or provide barriers to becoming involved in terrorism.⁹⁸ As Doosje et al. conclude in a study of micro, meso, and macro level factors in the process of radicalisation: it is impossible to understand this process “without taking into account the group-level psychological processes in terms of belonging, social influence and polarization”.⁹⁹ In the field of criminology, many attempts have been made to develop theoretical models of criminal behaviour, taking into account individual, biological, and

⁹¹ Randy Borum, ‘Counterterrorism Training Post-9/11’, *The Changing Face of Terrorism*, 2004, 62–73.

⁹² Scott Atran, ‘Genesis of Suicide Terrorism’, *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 299, no. 5612 (7 March 2003): 1534–39, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1078854>.

⁹³ Denoeux and Carter, ‘Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism’, 1.

⁹⁴ Jackson, ‘Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward’, 9.

⁹⁵ Sara Zeiger and Anne Aly, ‘Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice’ (Perth: Hedayah and Curtin University, 2015), 3.

⁹⁶ Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, ‘Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 5–22.

⁹⁷ Mareile Kaufmann, *Ethnic Profiling and Counter-Terrorism: Examples of European Practice and Possible Repercussions*, vol. 46 (LIT Verlag Münster, 2010).

⁹⁸ Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rausch, *Religious Education: Between Radicalism and Tolerance* (Springer, 2018).

⁹⁹ Bertjan Doosje et al., ‘Terrorism, Radicalization and de-Radicalization’, *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (October 2016): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.06.008>.

psychological factors as well as social, situational, and cultural factors that seem to play a role in offending behaviour.¹⁰⁰

Within terrorism studies the debate on how and why individuals engage in terrorism has centred around the term radicalisation. However, there is neither a common definition nor a shared understanding of what radicalisation is and how the process of radicalisation unfolds. Some scholars, such as criminologist Gary LaFree,¹⁰¹ have long advocated that the body of academic literature in the field of criminology should be used to analyse the similarities and differences between common violence and political violence including terrorism. In his opinion, what these two have in common is that forms of violence are used to achieve a specific goal.¹⁰² Others, both in the psychological and the criminological field, have put forward that conventional crime is characterised by factors and mechanisms that also underpin terrorism,¹⁰³ including factors such as value, loss, shame, frustration, and repressed anger, alongside the pursuit of respect (either individually or as a group).¹⁰⁴ As such, important insights from (socio-) psychological and criminological analysis may also help establish taxonomy of factors playing a role in involvement in terrorism.

2.3 Explaining involvement in terrorism

Given that terrorism studies, as a subfield of security studies, is a relatively young field, it has a strong multidisciplinary character. Studies in the field adopt disciplinary perspectives ranging from history, political science, and international relations to criminology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.¹⁰⁵ Despite Schmid's assertion that this has nonetheless resulted in a "fairly solid body of consolidated knowledge",¹⁰⁶ a number of terrorism scholars including Crenshaw and Reich have complained that there is still a tendency to explain complex behaviour in mono-causal terms.¹⁰⁷ Adopting a multilevel framework of analysis to analyse involvement makes sense because first, the academic literature supports understanding involvement in terrorism as the outcome of a multifaceted trajectory that is impacted by many different elements. Second, these elements can be found at different levels of analysis. Third and finally, involvement in terrorism is best understood as a dynamic process, meaning that the importance of the elements that play a role change

¹⁰⁰ Kevin M. Beaver, 'Genetics and Crime', in *The Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment* (American Cancer Society, 2015), 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118519639.wbecpx073>.

¹⁰¹ Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, 'How Does Studying Terrorism Compare to Studying Crime?', in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Deflem Mathieu, vol. 5, Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 53–74, [https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136\(2004\)0000005006](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136(2004)0000005006).

¹⁰² Vincenzo Ruggiero, 'Organised Behaviour and Organised Identity', *Beijing Law Review* 01, no. 01 (2010): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2010.11003>.

¹⁰³ Gary LaFree and James Hendrickson, 'Build a Criminal Justice Policy for Terrorism', *Criminology & Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (2007): 781–90.

¹⁰⁴ Arie W Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, *The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism* (na, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ B. W. Schuurman, 'Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of Involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005', Doctoral Thesis, 26 January 2017, <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/45328>; Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism," 458; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "The Role of History and Continuity in Terrorism Research," in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 51-75.

¹⁰⁶ Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism," 470.

¹⁰⁷ Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Political Terrorism," in *Political Psychology*, ed. Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), 381. Walter Reich, "Understanding Terrorist Behaviour: The Limits and Opportunities of Psychological Inquiry," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990; reprint, 1998), 261-71.

over time.¹⁰⁸ Or, in the words of terrorism researcher Schuurman: “(...) although a particular factor may convincingly explain why someone became involved in a terrorist group in the first place, it may be irrelevant to understanding how or why that person came to commit an actual act of violence.”¹⁰⁹

2.4 Micro level explanations

The micro level of analysis draws mainly upon psychological explanations for why individuals become involved in terrorism.¹¹⁰ Borum and Victoroff each conducted literature reviews to structure the explanations for individuals’ engagement with terrorism.¹¹¹ Within terrorism studies, two main strands of literature can be distinguished that seek explanations for involvement in terrorism. The first of these deals with theories focused on involvement that centre on the individual profiles of terrorist with the idea that these are somehow distinct in terms of psychology or emotional mindset, and explain involvement in terrorism as a result of psychopathological characteristics or as a consequence of psycho-sociological processes.¹¹² The second views involvement in terrorism as the result of specific cognitive processes where someone’s worldview or ideology is a determining factor in the likelihood that an individual engages with terrorism.

2.4.1 Psychopathological theories

Underlying the psychopathological tradition that developed over the 1970s and 1980s was the assumption “that non-violent behaviour is the accepted norm, and that those engaged in terrorist activities therefore necessarily must be abnormal”.¹¹³ The psychopathological tradition thus ignores the social context of the individual in the search for deviant character traits. Within this tradition, some authors focused on understanding involvement in terrorism as the consequence of psychopathology or the outcome of psychological trauma sustained in early or late childhood.¹¹⁴ In the 1990s, Jerrold Post coined the term “terrorist psycho-logic” – referring to his research proposition that “[t]errorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces, and that their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit.”¹¹⁵

While psychopathology as an overall explanation for terrorism has become less prevalent, some studies do report on specific psychopathological traits in terrorist offender populations.¹¹⁶ For example, Kleinmann researched home-grown Sunni militants in the US and concluded that the prevalence of mental health diagnoses is higher among terrorists.¹¹⁷ In another study focused on suicide terrorism, Lankford partially confirmed this by concluding

¹⁰⁸ Bjørge, "Conclusions," 260; Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; repr., 2006), 9-10; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 7-10.

¹⁰⁹ Schuurman, 'Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist', 36.

¹¹⁰ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Hudson, 'The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?'; Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*; Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist'.

¹¹¹ Ibid.; "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37-62; Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist," 3-42.

¹¹² Charles W. Kegley, *International Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls* (St. Martin's Press New York, 1990).

¹¹³ Schmid and Jongman, 'Political Terrorism. Oxford.'

¹¹⁴ Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist'; cf Crenshaw, 'The Psychology of Political Terrorism'.

¹¹⁵ Post, *Current Understanding of Terrorist Motivation and Psychology Implications for a Differentiated Antiterrorist Policy*, 25.

¹¹⁶ Liem, M., van Buuren, J., de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J., Schönberger, H., & Bakker, E. (2018). European lone actor terrorists versus "common" homicide offenders: An empirical analysis. *Homicide studies*, 22(1), 45-69.

¹¹⁷ Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States," 287-88.

that a substantial number of individuals in his research population was diagnosed with mental health issues such as “depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health problems.”¹¹⁸ In the Netherlands, Weenink analyzed police files of terrorist offenders and concluded that just under fifty percent of his sample of Dutch jihadists displayed what he labeled “problematic behaviour” and that six percent had diagnosed mental health problems.¹¹⁹ And an extensive life-course analysis of 250 West German, 227 left-wing and 23 right-wing terrorists, conducted by a consortium of researchers found that especially the two psychological mechanisms of externalisation and splitting were predominant in the population.¹²⁰

However, the psychopathological perspective has received much criticism for “depoliticizing terrorism” and for its lack of an empirical basis. Convincing evidence for a distinctly different psychological profile of terrorists has not been found.¹²¹ To the contrary, the most common indicator of individual terrorists appears to be how normal they are.¹²² As a result, scholars advocated for a more contextually rich view on terrorism through recognising the influence of the environment upon individuals.¹²³ Terrorism scholar Wilkinson, for example, argues that we should pay much more attention to the social environment within which terrorists adopt and form their narratives or ideologies to understand involvement in terrorism. According to him, the most promising avenue for explaining terrorism involvement can be found in the analysis of the political motives they have and placing these in their “unique political, historical, and cultural context, and the ideology and aims of the groups involved”.¹²⁴ Crenshaw, reasoning along the same lines, remarks that “terrorism is not the direct result of social conditions but of individual perceptions of those conditions.”¹²⁵

2.4.2 Cognitive theories

Within the cognitive tradition, Victoroff has focused on two concepts, namely cognitive style and cognitive capacity. Cognitive style refers to someone’s mindset or how individuals make decisions and the biases involved in that process.¹²⁶ Cognitive capacity how able individuals are to apply their cognitive capabilities to their lives – for example how they store information, how well they can concentrate, to what extent they can understand and adhere to norms and regulations, to come to logical conclusions based on rational reasoning, and whether they can make accurate risk analyses.¹²⁷ More recently, the concept of *radicalisation* has been put front and center in individual-level explanations in the field of

¹¹⁸ Adam Lankford, “Précis of the Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers,” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 4 (2014): 354-55.

¹¹⁹ Anton W. Weenink, “Behavioural Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 24-27.

¹²⁰ L Bollinger, ‘Die Entwicklung Zu Terroristischem Handeln Als Psychosozialer Prozess: Begegnungen Mit Beteiligten [The Development of Terrorist Actions as a Psychosocial Process: Encounters with Participants]’, in *Analysen Zum Terrorismus [Analysis of Terrorism]*, ed. H. Jager, G. Schmidtchen, and L. Sullwold, Lebenslauf-Analysen 2 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981).

¹²¹ Victoroff, ‘The Mind of the Terrorist’, 31–32.

¹²² David Weatherston and Jonathan Moran, ‘Terrorism and Mental Illness: Is There a Relationship?’, *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 47, no. 6 (2003): 698–713.

¹²³ Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann. (2017). *Fear thy neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist attacks in the West*. Ledizioni; see also Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds. *The foreign fighters phenomenon in the European Union: profiles, threats & policies*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016.

¹²⁴ Wilkinson, ‘Trends in International Terrorism and the American Response’.

¹²⁵ Martha Crenshaw, ‘Questions to Be Answered, Research to Be Done, Knowledge to Be Applied.’, in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990), 250.

¹²⁶ Martha Crenshaw, ‘Questions to Be Answered’, 250.

¹²⁷ Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist,” 26.

terrorism studies.¹²⁸ Generally speaking, this term is used to denote a process within which someone adopts ideological (political or religious views) that become increasingly extreme.¹²⁹ Within the cognitive tradition, radicalisation is viewed as a process of change on the mental level that entails the internalisation of (more) radical or even extreme beliefs.¹³⁰ Buijs and Demant and Sloodman and Tillie, for example, see radicalisation first and foremost as a process that involves the “de-legitimization” of the conventional order in society and politics, leading individuals to harbour a strong wish to change this and – ultimately to change that might necessarily involve the use of violence.¹³¹ To clarify the distinction between individuals that do or do not go on to use violence, Horgan differentiates between “violent radicalization” on the one hand and “radicalization” on the other, defining the latter as the “social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology.”¹³²

In the cognitive tradition, several models have been developed to evaluate the level of radicalisation by assessing to what extent an individual adheres to a violent extremist narrative or is influenced by the beliefs of their social network. Kruglanski and colleagues, for example, see radicalisation as “a movement in the direction of *supporting* or *enacting* radical behaviour.”¹³³ An example of such a model is the *Quest for Significance*, developed by Kruglanski et al. that explains involvement in terrorism as primarily a way to maintain or gain a sense of significance in the face of unfavourable or even harmful conditions. Examples of these conditions are discrimination, humiliation, or relative deprivation.¹³⁴ In this model, an individual may be radicalised because of strong *needs* to feel accepted and to matter in the eyes of others. Other individuals may be radicalised primarily because of the *narrative* to which they are exposed. Yet other individuals may be radicalised through the social influence of their radical friends and relatives, that is, by the social *network* to which they belong.

Partially in line with Kruglanski’s quest for significance, Taylor introduced the concept of “fanaticism” to explain individual involvement in terrorism. According to him, beliefs or worldviews can have an influence on behaviour as they generally provide guidance or a set of rules to live by that provide a person with a link between their direct behaviour and some (ideological) distant outcome such as salvation or redemption.¹³⁵ Fanaticism, according to Taylor, refers to behaviour that demonstrates “excessive enthusiasm” for specific ideological beliefs.¹³⁶ While he asserts that for most individuals, ideological beliefs are only one among many other influences in their lives, to the fanatic, “the influence of ideology is

¹²⁸ Arun Kundnani, “Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept,” *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (2012): 7; Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 480.

¹²⁹ Schmid, ‘Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation’.

¹³⁰ Randy Borum, “Understanding the Terrorist Mindset,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 72, no. 7 (2003): 7-10; Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, “Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the Challenge of Extremist and Radicalized Prisoners,” (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), 2.

¹³¹ Sloodman and Tillie, “Processen Van Radicaliseren,” 24; Buijs and Demant, “Extremisme En Radicaliseren,” 173; Froukje Demant et al., “Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation,” in *IMES Reports Series* (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2008), 12-13.

¹³² Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 152.

¹³³ Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 35, no. Supplement S1 (2014): 70.

¹³⁴ Arie W. Kruglanski et al., ‘Terrorism--a (Self) Love Story: Redirecting the Significance Quest Can End Violence’, *The American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (October 2013): 559–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032615>.

¹³⁵ Kruglanski et al., 112–13, 269. ; Maxwell Taylor, *The Fanatics: A Behavioural Approach to Political Violence* (London: Brassey’s, 1991).

¹³⁶ Taylor, *The Fanatics: A Behavioural Approach to Political Violence*, 14.

such that it excludes or attenuates other social, political or personal forces that might be expected to control and influence behaviour.”¹³⁷

Theories from disciplines including criminology,¹³⁸ sociology,¹³⁹ and psychology¹⁴⁰ tend to view terrorists as coming from a background characterised by hardship. What that means exactly is explained in various ways by authors but they generally agree that the individual is faced with a form of (perceived) humiliation. Humiliation can stem from a range of personal circumstances, such as personal failure,¹⁴¹ the loss of a loved one,¹⁴² or feeling stigmatized within the social community.¹⁴³ From the cognitive perspective, the exact event or condition matters less, it is the psychological effect these experiences or condition have that provide what Wiktorowicz has described as a “cognitive opening.” He explains that cognitive openings, or “trigger events” are generally induced on by a feeling of (personal) crisis, whether it be of personal, social, political or economic nature. This perceived crisis can lead to a person questioning the beliefs they previously held.¹⁴⁴ This, in turn, can set in motion a process of adopting more and more radical and/or extremist beliefs and potentially even participating in political violence.¹⁴⁵ An important disclaimer here is that the perceived crisis that produces a cognitive opening does not need to be based on a personal experience of humiliation. It can also be brought on by empathising with the suffering of others or group humiliation.¹⁴⁶

Another cognitive concept that is often used in the context of radicalisation and terrorism is the concept of “dehumanization.” According to Bandura, beliefs or an ideology can free its adherents to act violently against ones enemies “without the burden of guilt typically attached to perpetration of violence”.¹⁴⁷ Tactics like dehumanisation (displaying the (perceived) enemy as less than or even non-human) can provide a very effective way of doing this,¹⁴⁸ while at the same time indoctrinating and stimulating an individual into a simplistic, black and white type of thought-process that is very appealing to those who strive for

¹³⁷ Taylor, *The Fanatics*, 33.

¹³⁸ Robert Agnew, ‘A General Strain Theory of Terrorism’, *Theoretical Criminology* 14, no. 2 (1 May 2010): 131–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480609350163>.

¹³⁹ Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*.

¹⁴⁰ McCauley and Moskaleiko, ‘Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism’.; see also John Horgan, ‘From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.

¹⁴¹ Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, ‘Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization’, *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2017): 815–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12376>.

¹⁴² Anne Speckhard, *Talking to Terrorists: Understanding the Psycho-Social Motivations of Militant Jihadi Terrorists, Mass Hostage Takers, Suicide Bombers and Martyrs to Combat Terrorism in Prison and Community Rehabilitation* (McLean, VA: Advances press, 2012).

¹⁴³ Ami Pedazhur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Polity Press, 2005).

¹⁴⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam,” in *The Roots of Islamic Radicalism* (Yale University, United States 2004), 1, 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ Gaetano Joe Ilardi, “Interviews with Canadian Radicals,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 726-27; Porter and Kebbell, “Radicalization in Australia: Examining Australia’s Convicted Terrorists,” 227; Wiktorowicz, “Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam,” 1.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Silke, *Terrorism: All That Matters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 66-67; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 72-75; “The Next Generation of Terror,” 40-41.

¹⁴⁷ A. Bandura, ‘Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.

¹⁴⁸ Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael E Fromson, ‘Disinhibition of Aggression through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims’, *Journal of Research in Personality* 9, no. 4 (1 December 1975): 253–69, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566\(75\)90001-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(75)90001-X).

significance.¹⁴⁹ As such, dehumanisation is generally not viewed as an overall explanation for involvement in terrorism, but rather, as one step that can shed light on why individuals engage in violence or view their own beliefs as the one truth.

Psychologists McCauley and Moskaleiko argue that dehumanisation is an outcome of “essentialist thinking” that can become dominant in groups of people who are at odds with others. A prominent sign of this mindset is the tendency to over-generalize conclusions. An example is viewing the behavior of one individual as representative for the “evil nature” of an entire group or culture. Another sign is the idea that one’s group is somehow under attack and runs the risk of being contaminated by other individuals. And finally, a sign is the tendency to refer to others using derogatory terminology that characterizes them as either stupid or evil. In some cases this can take the form of dehumanization, for instance by calling enemies “sheep” or “pigs.”¹⁵⁰ This often also includes placing one’s own identity on the opposite side of that spectre, referring to oneself or group members as heroes, soldiers or revolutionaries.¹⁵¹

Overall, within the literature on micro level explanations for engagement with terrorism, there is a split both within the psychopathological and the cognitive perspective between authors who focus on individual mindsets, perceptions or thoughts directly related to behaviour and those that do not. Take, for example, one of the most cited definitions of radicalisation by McCauley and Moskaleiko, who define it as “increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict.”¹⁵² Or the definition by Dalgaard-Nielsen, who views “violent radicalization” as a “process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts.”¹⁵³ These behaviour-oriented definitions and theories include for example studies conducted by Dawson on religious movements and by King and Taylor on home-grown jihadism.¹⁵⁴ And as Schmid concluded in his study on radicalisation, many government agencies also adopt behaviour-oriented definitions of radicalisation to explain the developments that lead up to engagement with terrorism.¹⁵⁵

Where most academics that include a link to behaviour in their definitions do not necessarily believe that ideas alone provide sufficient explanations for someone’s involvement in terrorism,¹⁵⁶ the link to violent behaviour is hard to overlook. As Schuurman notes, “the very term ‘radicalization’ implies that radical (or as is more often the case ‘extremist’) ideas are key to understanding terrorism.”¹⁵⁷ However, the vast majority of people who radicalise or adopt radical beliefs never act on them.¹⁵⁸ And the reverse is true as

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Victoroff, Janice R. Adelman, and Miriam Matthews, ‘Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora’, *Political Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2012): 791–809.

¹⁵⁰ McCauley and Moskaleiko, *Friction*, 161-67.

¹⁵¹ Bandura, “Mechanisms,” 170; Crenshaw, “The Psychology of Political Terrorism,” 398; Loza, “The Psychology of Extremism and Terrorism,” 149; Della Porta, *Social Movements*, 174-76.

¹⁵² McCauley and Moskaleiko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization,” 416.

¹⁵³ Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe,” 798.

¹⁵⁴ Dawson, “The Study of New Religious Movements,” 4; King and Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists,” 603.

¹⁵⁵ See Danish, Dutch and Swedish government definitions in: Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation,” 12.

¹⁵⁶ Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 45-47; Arie Kruglanski, “Inside the Terrorist Mind: The Relevance of Ideology,” *Estudios de Psicología: Studies in Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006): 274-75; Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization,” 76-78.

¹⁵⁷ Schuurman, *Understanding Home Grown Jihadism*, p. 159.

¹⁵⁸ Borum, “Rethinking Radicalization,” 1-2; “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 8; James Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture between Attitudes and Behaviours at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 198-211; McCauley and Moskaleiko, *Friction*, 219-21; Max Taylor, “Conflict Resolution and Counter Radicalization: Where Do We Go from Here?,” in *DIIS Religion and Violence* (Copenhagen: Danish Institution for International Studies, 2012), 1.

well; research has demonstrated many terrorists are not or not first and foremost motivated by radical beliefs.¹⁵⁹ To the contrary, there is an empirical lack of evidence to support the idea that radical ideologies lead to violent behaviour.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, what is viewed as “radical” or “extreme” is always relative to the prevailing norms in a society and as such, radicalisation as a concept is inherently fraught by its contextual and intersubjective nature.¹⁶¹

2.5 Meso level explanations

On the group level, sociological theories offer various explanations for why individuals become involved with politically violent groups. The point of departure for meso level explanations is that individual grievances alone cannot explain (participation in) extreme violence. According to ‘pure sociologist’¹⁶² Black researchers should focus on identifying the sociological ties and relations between the terrorists, their grievances, and their adversaries – or the “social geometry” of the actors.¹⁶³ The outcome of that process can lead to the identification and prioritization of a variety of factors across theories of involvement in terrorism, as well as differences in the language used to describe involvement in terrorism. Meso level approaches to explaining terrorism have gained ground over the past decade¹⁶⁴ with many authors arguing the individual level received too much attention at the expense of group level explanations.¹⁶⁵ In essence, as Nesser argues, terrorism is a group phenomenon.¹⁶⁶ An analysis of meso level factors explaining or aiming to better understand involvement in terrorism found a wide variety of potential explanations.

A number of explanations focus on how terrorist organisations are established; how and why do individuals engage with terrorist and/or (violent) extremist groups? Some studies point to the relevance of pre-existing social connections.¹⁶⁷ The meso level includes explanations that concentrate on the concepts of social distance and social control, as well as social psychological concepts such as collective humiliation, peer pressure, and in-group/outgroup thinking.

2.5.1 Social distance theories

Senchal de la Roche, a sociologist, argues that environments characterized by high levels of what she calls “social distance”¹⁶⁸ or “social polarization” are most vulnerable to the occurrence of terrorism. This distance refers to the polarization between “perpetrators and victims including a high degree of cultural and relational distance, inequality, and functional

¹⁵⁹ Abrahms, “What Terrorists Really Want,” 98-99; Maxwell Taylor and Ethel Quayle, *Terrorist Lives* (London: Brassey's, 1994), 37-38.

¹⁶⁰ King and Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists,” 615-16; Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 15.

¹⁶¹ Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 876-77.

¹⁶² Pure sociology is a paradigm developed by Donald Black, building on earlier work by Emile Durkheim, that conceptualises human behavior in terms of social life rather than driven by individual considerations.

¹⁶³ Donald Black, ‘Terrorism as Social Control’, in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 9–18.

¹⁶⁴ Martha Crenshaw, ‘The Logic of Terrorism’, *Terrorism in Perspective* 24 (2007): 24–33.

¹⁶⁵ Scott Matthew Kleinmann, “Radicalisation of homegrown Sunni militants in the United States: Comparing converts and non-converts”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, nr. 4 (2012): 288; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 22.

¹⁶⁶ Nesser, “Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat,” 440, 50; Ramón Spaaij, “The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment,” *ibid.* 33, no. 9 (2010): 859.

¹⁶⁷ Donatella Della Porta, ‘Recruitment Processes in Clandestine Political Organisations: Italian Left Wing Terrorism’, *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 309–10.

¹⁶⁸ Social distance refers to difference between social locations, involving categories such as wealth, authority, integration, culture, intimacy, organisation, activities, etc.

independence”.¹⁶⁹ In line with this, sociologist Black discusses the concept of social distance, and specifically notes that “terrorism has an “inter-collective” direction: terrorists strike against civilians associated with another collectivity, be it another ethno-religious group or foreign nationals”. Additionally, he asserts that terrorism is generally directed towards the upper echelons of power with attacks aimed at targets that (symbolically) represent the local or national government, foreign regimes, or other groups that are perceived of as elites: as superior in terms of their economic, social or political standing. Terrorism is then essentially “the weapon of the weak” or an attempt at “social control from below.”¹⁷⁰ Black argues that, “terrorism in its purest form arises inter-collectively and upwardly across long distances in multidimensional social space.”¹⁷¹ This means that the larger the social distance between victims and perpetrators, the more likely it is that terrorism will occur in its most destructive form.

2.5.2 Social psychological group theories

Humiliation has already been mentioned as a factor that can play a role on the individual level, however this can also take place at the group or collective level. Group humiliation can, for example, be experienced due to the actions of a repressive government, or oppressive elite,¹⁷² disenfranchisement or discrimination¹⁷³ of one’s ethnic, social or religious group, or through occupation of a territory by a foreign actor.¹⁷⁴ However, humiliation alone does not account for involvement in terrorism, whether it be on the individual or the group level. Group processes play a role in further facilitating becoming involved, either by fortifying beliefs or by providing opportunities for (violent) action. For instance, Sageman concluded in a study of the radicalisation of Islamic extremists in the diaspora that “without network connections there would be a lot of angry young Muslims, but no real terrorists” as they would not know where or whom to turn to remedy their situations.¹⁷⁵ Likewise, a study conducted by Jasko et al. concluded that a close relationship with another individual who is radical or extreme increases the likelihood that someone will become involved with violence driven by ideology.¹⁷⁶ In line with this finding, Kleinmann studied Sunni terrorist networks and found that over the ones who were responsible for conduct domestic violent terrorist attacks in the United States were radicalised largely as part of their social network.¹⁷⁷ What it is exactly on the group level that contributes to involvement in terrorism is explained in three different ways. First of all, some authors stress the importance of collective identity, where being part of a group of others with radical or extremist ideas generally creates binds or “fuses” people’s individual identity with that of the

¹⁶⁹ Roberta Senechal de la Roche, ‘Collective Violence as Social Control’, in *Sociological Forum*, vol. 11 (Springer, 1996), 97–128.

¹⁷⁰ Black, ‘Terrorism as Social Control’, 18.

¹⁷¹ Black, ‘Terrorism as Social Control’.

¹⁷² David Webber and Arie W Kruglanski, ‘The Social Psychological Makings of a Terrorist’, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Aggression and violence, 19 (1 February 2018): 131–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.03.024>.

¹⁷³ Victoroff, Adelman, and Matthews, ‘Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora’.

¹⁷⁴ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House, 2005).

¹⁷⁵ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*.

¹⁷⁶ Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, ‘Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism’.

¹⁷⁷ Kleinmann, ‘Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts’.

group.¹⁷⁸ This process can have a more volitional as well as a more forced nature. For instance, Della Porta underlined the importance of peer pressure as in her research an unconscious desire for approval of friends or allies who were previously members of illegal organisations impacted the involvement of new group members.¹⁷⁹

In the context of terrorism, this collective identity can even progress to the point where one is willing to sacrifice themselves and die for one's "brothers in arms."¹⁸⁰ A second reason is that like-minded individuals function as a confirmation of an ideology – they validate the beliefs of the individual.¹⁸¹ This is what Jervis labeled "group think."¹⁸² Third, the presence of allies increases an individual's willingness to deviate against normative pressures.¹⁸³

As such, engagement in terrorism can provide individuals with group-level benefits that coalesce around the concept of a collective identity providing members with emotional fulfillment (for perceived humiliation), cognitive benefits (confirming one's own beliefs or strengthening an ideology), and social value (the potential to acquire status, an increased sense of self-esteem and the need to belong).¹⁸⁴ These factors do not only play a role in physical groups but can also take place through virtual connections, either through social media or on the Internet.¹⁸⁵

2.6 Macro level explanations

In the academic literature, the macro level of analysis is generally viewed to be mainly useful in long-term forecasting of terrorism patterns. This level of analysis, also known as the systematic or structural level, relates to "specific characteristics of the social, cultural, economic, and (geo)political *environment* that can enable, motivate, or trigger the use of terrorism".¹⁸⁶ A clear causal connection has never been established between factors on this level (i.e. poverty, illiteracy, or climate change¹⁸⁷) and terrorism, even though these factors are often labeled "root causes" of terrorism.¹⁸⁸ As such, while structural conditions can provide fertile ground for involvement in terrorism, they cannot be viewed as causally related to – or sufficient explanatory factors for – involvement in terrorism.

¹⁷⁸ William B. Swann et al., 'Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (May 2009): 995–1011, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668>.

¹⁷⁹ Della Porta, 'Recruitment Processes in Clandestine Political Organisations: Italian Left Wing Terrorism'.

¹⁸⁰ Scott Atran, Hammad Sheikh, and Angel Gomez, 'Devoted Actors Sacrifice for Close Comrades and Sacred Cause', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111, no. 50 (16 December 2014): 17702–3, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1420474111>.

¹⁸¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Penguin Group, 1966).

¹⁸² Irving Lester Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

¹⁸³ Solomon E. Asch, 'Opinions and Social Pressure', in *Readings About The Social Animal*, ed. Joshua Aronson and Elliot Aronson (Worth, 2011), 17–26.

¹⁸⁴ Dina Al Raffie, 'Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora', *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (December 2013): 67–68, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.4.4>; Clark R. McCauley and Mary E. Segal, 'Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups.', 1987, 336.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Olesen and Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'Islamism as Social Movement', *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR), Ed.(Aarhus: Aarhus University, Denmark, 2009)*, 2009, 19.

¹⁸⁶ Brynjar, H-w, and Torp, *Why Terrorism Occurs - A Survey of Theories and Hypotheses on the Causes of Terrorism*; Ross, 'A Model of the Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism'.; Lia and Skjølberg, "Causes of Terrorism," 40.

¹⁸⁷ James J.F. Forest, "Exploring Root Causes of Terrorism: An Introduction," in *The Making of a Terrorist, Volume Iii: Root Causes*, ed. James J.F. Forest (Westport / London: Praeger Security International, 2005), 1-2.

¹⁸⁸ John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London / New York: Routledge, 2014), 85-86.

Factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism on this level can mainly be found in the historical, cultural, economic, political and social context of a society. Examples are extensive poverty, significant patterns of social inequality, widespread conflict, war and local, national or regional instability, and political repression.¹⁸⁹ Overall, explanations on the macro level fall into two categories: proximate and distal causes – or, as terrorism researcher Martha Crenshaw labelled them in her analysis of the causes of terrorism: preconditions and precipitants.¹⁹⁰

2.6.1 Preconditions

Crenshaw describes preconditions as circumstances that provide opportunities as well as potential motivations to become involved with terrorism or terrorist groups.¹⁹¹ Government repression, for example, or access to weapons, can both provide powerful incentives or opportunities for potential terrorists. Preconditions, however, are *necessary* but not *sufficient* to lead to terrorism. The capability to conduct a terrorist attack does not in and of itself lead to an attack, unless the person with access to weapons also happens to have a strong motivation to act. Factors that play a role in why individuals become involved in terrorism on the macro level can also pertain to specific events in people's lives where they become entangled in larger developments in their environment. Examples are rebellions or revolutions against the government, having to deal with the consequences of natural disasters that can leave a region in turmoil, or living in an area where terrorist groups have taken control – for example as was the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s or more recently, the so-called Islamic State that has been controlling large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq. Such events can enmesh individuals in a day-to-day environment characterised by (sometimes extreme) violence, and they can form decisive turning points in people's lives that can steer them towards involvement in political violence and terrorism.

In a larger sense, this is what authors often refer to as the correlation between failed states and terrorism.¹⁹² From this perspective, failed states are seen as places where terrorist groups can setup safe havens from which they can recruit new members, inspire others and create links with other terrorist groups across borders. However, Coggins, in a wide-ranging study into the correlation between failed or weak states on the one hand and terrorism on the other, provided some nuance in this debate when she wrote that “Much of the relationship between state failure and terrorism can plausibly be explained by “terrorism as war fighting.”¹⁹³ Instead, she finds that there are relationships between specific types of state failure, including human insecurity, state incapacity, and political collapse and the presence of terrorism.¹⁹⁴ This finding is confirmed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which conducted an extensive study into processes of engagement and involvement with terrorist groups across six African countries (not including Mali). Of all the factors they identified as push factors in the process of involvement, limited confidence in government, corrupt government, a perception of neglect and political marginalisation, and a lack of service provision by government featured as significant factors related to state failure.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ Edward Newman, ‘Exploring the “Root Causes” of Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 749–72.

¹⁹⁰ Martha Crenshaw, ‘The Causes of Terrorism’, *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99.

¹⁹¹ Crenshaw, 381.

¹⁹² Joseph K. Young and Michael G. Findley, ‘Promise and Pitfalls of Terrorism Research’, *International Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (2011): 411–31.

¹⁹³ Bridget L. Coggins, ‘Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999–2008)’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 19 March 2014, 456, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713515403>.

¹⁹⁴ Coggins, 458.

¹⁹⁵ ‘Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment’ (UNDP, 2017), 6.

Another precondition that features frequently in the academic literature is the assumption that poverty is a cause of terrorism.¹⁹⁶ For example, Bakker's analysis of the background of homegrown jihadists across Europe concluded that his sample could be characterized as generally coming from a low socioeconomic background.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, Fair and Shepherd looked into support for terrorism through surveying opinion polls and concluded those who were relatively poor had a higher chance of supporting terrorism.¹⁹⁸ This is again confirmed by the UNDP study, which concluded that "The grievances associated with growing up in contexts where multidimensional poverty is high and far deeper than national averages, with the lived reality of unemployment and underemployment, render 'economic factors' a major source of frustration identified by those who joined violent extremist groups."¹⁹⁹ At the same time, other authors concluded that an increase in personal capital can be linked to a decrease in support for political violence,²⁰⁰ or that there is no significant causal relation between low levels of economic development and terrorism.²⁰¹

In a similar vein, the research on lack of education and terrorism also shows a mixed picture. Where some studies confirm the notion that it is often individuals who have experienced a lack of education who are attracted to or recruited by terrorism groups;²⁰² other studies reach more nuanced or even opposite conclusions.²⁰³ Terrorism researcher Stern, for example, concluded that many religious schools in Pakistan (where students are purposely educated to steer them towards roles as foot soldiers or elite operatives in terrorist or armed extremist organisations) are funded by wealthy capitalists. In this context, the UNDP research specifically mentioned a religious illiteracy or misinterpretation of religion as a factor conducive to involvement with terrorism.²⁰⁴ All in all, as Krueger and Malečková note, this suggests that "the international community should not limit itself to increasing years of schooling but should consider the content of education."²⁰⁵ Given the fact that these findings are at odds, the main conclusion is that poverty and lack or quality of education in an of themselves do not provide a clear motivation for involvement in terrorism.

A government that is unable or unwilling to prevent terrorism is, according to Crenshaw, a specific precondition as well as one of the most significant causes of

¹⁹⁶ See the examples in: James A. Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159-60.

¹⁹⁷ Edwin Bakker, "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Farnham / Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 140.

¹⁹⁸ C. Christine Fair and Bryan Shepherd, "Who Supports Terrorism? Evidence from Fourteen Muslim Countries," *ibid.* 29, no. 1 (2006): 52, 71.

¹⁹⁹ 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 5.

²⁰⁰ Robert MacCulloch, "The Impact of Income on the Taste for Revolt," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2004): 843; Ayla Schbley, "Torn between God, Family, and Money: The Changing Profile of Lebanon's Religious Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 23, no. 3 (2000): 182.

²⁰¹ Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty," 170-71.

²⁰² Ana Bela Santos Bravo and Carlos Manuel Mendes Dias, "An Empirical Analysis of Terrorism: Deprivation, Islamism and Geopolitical Factors," *Defence and Peace Economics* 17, no. 4 (2006): 337; Jerrold M. Post, "The Socio-Cultural Underpinnings of Terrorist Psychology: When Hatred Is Bred in the Bone," in *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward*, ed. Tore Bjørgo (London / New York: Routledge, 2005), 64; Karin Von Hippel, "The Roots of Terrorism: Probing the Myths," *The Political Quarterly* 73, no. Supplement 1 (2002): 28-30.

²⁰³ Krueger and Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism," 125-26, 31-32, 35; Bakker, "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists," 140; Berrebi, "Evidence About the Link between Education," 17; Pape, *Dying to Win*, 214; Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 74-77; Abdelaziz Testas, "Determinants of Terrorism in the Muslim World: An Empirical Cross-Sectional Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 262-63.

²⁰⁴ 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 7.

²⁰⁵ Alan B Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, 'Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?', Working Paper (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2002), 33, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w9074>.

terrorism.²⁰⁶ This is not related to state failure in the broad sense but rather to the absence of adequate prevention by law enforcement agencies such as police and intelligence services – to prevent terrorism. Crenshaw explains that this can be due to inefficiency or leniency – dependent on the context. According to her, “for many governments, the cost of disallowing terrorism is too high.”²⁰⁷ Landes²⁰⁸ and Sandler et al.²⁰⁹ apply an economic model of criminal behaviour to transnational terrorism. Specifically, they zoom in on a cost-benefit analysis of involvement in crime where an increase in factors such as penalties and law enforcement influences the decision or incentive to become involved with terrorist activities. In the end, they conclude that there is no direct causal relation as in the end, participation in terrorist acts is more contingent on the perception that the terrorist act will bring about the desired political change.

2.6.3 Precipitants

Whereas preconditions, or contextual factors alone might provide a fertile ground for involvement with terrorism, they do not necessarily lead to involvement with terrorism unless individuals have a specific *motive* to engage or join. These turning points are what Crenshaw describes as precipitants. Precipitants are trigger events that often function as a final push for an individual to act; or in Crenshaw’s words: “specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism.”²¹⁰ Examples are the sudden loss of loved ones, a comment made by a politician that is perceived as a direct attack on one’s group, or a military strike.

Nonetheless, the factors discussed above that can structure an individual’s environment and heavily influence their lives, are in and of themselves not necessary conditions for becoming involved in terrorism. Following Crenshaw, these conditions are often labelled as *necessary* but not *sufficient* causes for an individual pathway into terrorism; they can provide the motivation to act and maybe even the means to do so but that still does not necessarily lead to engagement in terrorism.²¹¹ As Fishbein and Ajzen argue in their theory of *Reasoned Action*,²¹² a motivation to act leads to the intention to act *if* an individual has a positive attitude toward it and when social approval is anticipated, and when the individual believes they have the capability to act. Thus, we need to distinguish between engagement (with a cause, a group or an ideology) and intent (the willingness to use violence or commit extremist offenses).

Macro level factors that can push individuals towards involvement in terrorism are dynamic and can be understood through relative deprivation theory, which holds that individuals and groups perceive of certain grievances vis-à-vis other individuals or groups.²¹³ For example, the Troubles in Northern Ireland were influenced from the start by what was perceived by the Catholics as an underrepresentation of their group politically and a backward socioeconomic position compared to their Protestant neighbours.²¹⁴

The failed state – terrorism paradigm as a precondition is closely related to political grievances as a macro level precipitant influencing individual perceptions of a government’s

²⁰⁶ Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” 382.

²⁰⁷ Crenshaw, ‘The Causes of Terrorism’.

²⁰⁸ William M. Landes, ‘An Economic Study of U. S. Aircraft Hijacking, 1961-1976’, *The Journal of Law & Economics* 21, no. 1 (1978): 1–31.

²⁰⁹ Todd Sandler, John T. Tschirhart, and Jon Cauley, ‘A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism’, *The American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (1983): 36–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1956010>.

²¹⁰ Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” 381.

²¹¹ Crenshaw, ‘The Causes of Terrorism’, 381.

²¹² Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behaviour: The Reasoned Action Approach* (Psychology Press, 2011).

²¹³ Mario Coccia, ‘A Theory of General Causes of Terrorism’, *Archives of Psychology* 2, no. 4 (2018).

²¹⁴ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (Routledge, 2014).

exclusionary, illegitimate or unjust policies and thus, a strong motivator for their involvement in terrorism.²¹⁵ From this perspective, terrorism is an instrument to address these grievances and (potentially) gain political influence through violence. For example, the UNDP *Journey to Extremism in Africa* states that “A striking 71 percent pointed to ‘government action’, including ‘killing of a family member or friend’ or ‘arrest of a family member or friend’, as the incident that prompted them to join.”²¹⁶

Finally, Crenshaw notes that the excessive use of force by governments can provide a powerful precipitant to join extremist groups. Weinberg, for example, has argued that repressive policies have an exarbacating effect on the likelihood that a group will be mobilised into using violence but also underling a government’s vulnerability to being overthrown, should these policies fail.²¹⁷ Repressive policies, including the use of force, have the add-on effect of pushing moderate majorities towards the extreme sides of the political debate – and potentially into the arms of terrorist groups.²¹⁸ One study even concluded that state repression is a necessary cause for both the creation and the growth of terrorism.²¹⁹

2.7 Combined models

Many authors throughout history have acknowledged the correlation between human frustration on the one hand and the outbreak of political violence on the other. In his classic theory of revolution, Aristotle examined constitutions to understand the implications of revolutions and the factors that enable revolutions. Political philosopher De Tocqueville further discussed the role of revolutionary mechanisms in his influential study of the French Revolution where he – in line with Aristotle – speaks of the revolution as “a product of general causes that local causes pushed beyond all bounds.”²²⁰ These theories connect the personal mobilisation of feelings of resentment, anger, and aggression to specific individual circumstances on the social, economic or political level.²²¹ The link between frustration and aggressive behaviour, established by psychiatrist Freud among others, was further described in the book *Frustration and Aggression* by Dollard et al.²²² In 1964, Galtung²²³ argued that a situation in which individuals find themselves socio-politically disadvantaged vis-à-vis others, something he labelled as “a state of disequilibrium”, is more likely to provoke aggressive behaviour, which may include violence.

However, Davies nuanced that proposition by stating that these perceptions of a state of disequilibrium should be linked to people’s expectations.²²⁴ In his opinion, the likelihood of the occurrence of violent conflict is highest when individuals expect more than they

²¹⁵ Gary LaFree and Gary Ackerman, “The Empirical Study of Terrorism: Social and Legal Research,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 5 (2009): 360-62; Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” 383-84; Ehud Sprinzak, “The Process of Delegitimation: Towards a Linkage Theory of Political Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 1 (1991): 50-68.

²¹⁶ “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, 5.

²¹⁷ Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Arie Perliger, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups* (Routledge, 2008).

²¹⁸ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life Cycle of Birth, Growth, Transformation, and Demise* (Routledge, 2008).

²¹⁹ Rhonda L. Callaway and Julie Harrelson-Stephens, ‘Toward a Theory of Terrorism: Human Security as a Determinant of Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 773–96.

²²⁰ De Tocqueville, as quoted in Alan Kahan, ‘Tocqueville’s Two Revolutions’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1985, 585–96.

²²¹ Hakan Wiberg, ‘Konfliktteori Och Fredsforskning [Theory of Conflict and Peace Research]’, *Stockholm: Esselte Studium*, 1990.

²²² John Dollard et al., ‘Frustration and Aggression.’, 1939.

²²³ Johan Galtung, ‘A Structural Theory of Aggression’, *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 2 (1964): 95–119.

²²⁴ James C. Davies, ‘Toward a Theory of Revolution’, *American Sociological Review*, 1962, 69.

receive – especially when their circumstances, economically or politically speaking, have first improved but are then followed by a period of deterioration. His famous *Davies J-Curve* schematically portrays this process where he describes the tension following from unmet expectations and the resulting experience of deprivation as the main permissive circumstance for collective violence. His main thesis centers on the so-called “DFA-linkage”: deprivation leads to frustration, which in turn produces aggression or even violent conflict against the perceived oppressor. This perceived deprivation can be absolute but is often relative in the sense that it is the outcome of a growing disparity between one’s expectations and the extent to which those expectations are met.

Finally, a useful model to conceptualise the role that different factors play in processes of engagement and disengagement are what Norwegian terrorism scholar Bjørge and American terrorism scholar Tore Bjørge labelled “push and pull factors.”²²⁵ Push factors are negative forces and circumstances that make the present social affiliations unattractive and unpleasant, for example perceived discrimination or a lack of a sense of purpose. Conversely, pull factors offer attractive and rewarding alternatives into terrorism or towards a life out of terrorism, for example the feeling that joining a terrorist group will lead to a feeling of brotherhood. Barriers are factors that may block a process of such change, e.g. negative sanctions or removing opportunities. Factors on all three levels of analysis, the macro, meso, and micro level can either be push or pull factors. When both push and pull factors are strong and barriers are weak, a change into or out of terrorism or terrorist groups is likely to happen, according to Bjørge.

2.8 Shortcomings in current research

2.8.1 Lack of fieldwork and primary sources

The field of terrorism studies has suffered for a long time from a lack of theorisation, but that has changed after 9/11, with a noted rise in theories of terrorism, as “a reflection of the dramatic rise of terrorism itself.”²²⁶ Most appraisals of the field of terrorism studies – or the state of terrorism research (for those who dispute that such a field exists)²²⁷ – generally voice the same criticisms; the main one being the observed lack of primary research and the recycling of secondary data.²²⁸ A review of the post-2000 literature by Nasser-Eddine et al. lists a number of deficiencies in the academic literature on disengagement and countering violent extremism including a lack of primary sources, limited methodologies, and a non-critical approach to existing research. They also note a lack of more experienced terrorism researchers and an abundance of terrorism researchers many of whom have not undertaken any fieldwork, let alone having met with extremists.²²⁹ Silke evaluated in 2001 that of

²²⁵ Tore Bjørge, ‘Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right’, in *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, ed. Tore Bjørge and John G. Horgan, 2008, 30–48, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203884751-11>.

²²⁶ Roberta Senechal dela Roche, ‘Toward a Scientific Theory of Terrorism’, *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 1 (1 March 2004): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2004.00199.x>.

²²⁷ Among those who study terrorism, there is an ongoing debate as to whether we can speak of a clearly delineated field of ‘terrorism studies’ (hence the quotation marks). While some authors argue that creating a separate field of terrorism studies would necessarily impede on the multidisciplinary perspective, others explicitly place themselves in the field of terrorism studies.

²²⁸ John Horgan, ‘„Understanding Terrorism: Old Assumptions, New Assertions, and Challenges for Research”’, *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism*, Amsterdam: IOS Press/NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2006, 2–3; Avishag Gordon, ‘Terrorism as an Academic Subject after 9/11: Searching the Internet Reveals a Stockholm Syndrome Trend’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 1 (2005): 46–50; Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research*.

²²⁹ Nasser-Eddine et al., ‘Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review’.

contemporary terrorism research, only nine percent is based on interviews with terrorists (either former or current ones).²³⁰ Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley surveyed 14,006 articles on terrorism in 2006, and concluded that of the peer-reviewed articles, 96 percent of the studies could be characterised as “think pieces” and only three percent was based on empirical research.²³¹ Schmid, in his 2006 handbook on terrorism summarising the state of the field, notes that despite the increase in the number of publications after 9/11, “new empirical research did not increase proportionally with the production of new publications.”²³² A study by Schuurman and Eijkman dating back to 2014 indicates that not much has changed for the better, as they conclude “Instead of referring to primary sources of data, such as interviews with (former) terrorists, transcripts of their interrogations or intercepted communications, most publications on terrorism speak amongst themselves.”²³³ Nonetheless, in a more recent overview, Schuurman noted a positive change as in his review 53.8 percent of the authors used some kind of primary sources. He writes:

the lack of research based on primary sources, one of the most enduring and detrimental problems to face the field, finally appears to be abating. Of course, this does not mean that all associated issues are similarly being resolved; the empirical verification of explanations for involvement in terrorism, for instance, still seems a long way off.

According to Dawson, aside from a lack of primary resources – especially direct interviews with those labelled as terrorists – the field suffers from “‘deep suspicions about what terrorists say, casting doubt on the evidentiary value of such data’”.²³⁴ He explains that essentially this suspicion is rooted in the hermeneutical question of what one really can know of someone else’s motivations and the corresponding question of how much value we should attribute to terrorists’ own accounts of involvement. This echoes Horgan, cautioning that we must always keep in mind when researching terrorist narratives that any account will always be both incomplete and biased, and those accounts will often be characterized by justification in hind-sight or what he calls a “post-hoc invention” inspired by ideology.²³⁵ As such, terrorists’ narratives can be authentic expressions of their underlying motivations, however issues related to accurate memory as well as deliberately shifting facts will inevitably accompany any retrospective narrative of past conduct.

2.8.2 Western bias and labelling

Most of the academic literature on terrorism is very heavily influenced by Western accounts of radicalisation.²³⁶ Terrorism as a phenomenon has been labelled a ‘weapon of the

²³⁰ Silke, ‘The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism’, 14.

²³¹ Cynthia Lum, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alison Sherley, ‘Are Counter-Terrorism Strategies Effective? The Results of the Campbell Systematic Review on Counter-Terrorism Evaluation Research’, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 2, no. 4 (2006): 492.

²³² Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 460.

²³³ Schuurman and Eijkman, ‘Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources’.

²³⁴ Lorne L. Dawson, ‘Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 5 (2019): 74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26798579>.

²³⁵ John G. Horgan and John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Routledge, 2004), 91.

²³⁶ Edna OF Reid, ‘Evolution of a Body of Knowledge: An Analysis of Terrorism Research’, *Information Processing & Management* 33, no. 1 (1997): 91–106; cf Sidney Tarrow, ‘Foreword’, in *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, by Donatella Della Porta (Cambridge University Press, 2006), vii; cf Silke, ‘The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research’, 207–10; Louise Richardson and Leonard Weinberg, ‘Conflict Theory and the Trajectory of Terrorist Campaigns in Western Europe’, in *Research on Terrorism* (Routledge, 2004), 158–80.

weak'²³⁷ against states that have a monopoly on the use of force. This perspective is wedded to an inherently Western view of states in the Westphalian sense, where states are defined by sovereignty, fixed territory, mutual recognition and control (often through a monopoly on the use of force).²³⁸ This raises the question to what extent our knowledge of involvement in and desistance from terrorism is applicable to non-Western countries. As Chomsky notes,²³⁹ the question is not just what defines “terrorism” but rather, who gets to call who a “terrorist”?²⁴⁰ Or, in the words of sociologist Oliverio:

... The analysis of terror, terrorists, and terrorism has been predominantly provided by a tiny fraction of the world’s population residing primarily in privileged estranged, spaces. It is time to reopen and re-examine these issues and present alternative questions and responses from the rest of humankind, people who suffer daily from violence and terrorism.²⁴¹

This thesis seeks to do just that by focusing on those labelled as terrorists and living in a daily reality that is far removed from the “privileged, estranged, spaces” Oliverio refers to. Another issue in terrorism research is that where academics oftentimes lack access to primary sources, government officials who do have that access are often faced with the politics inherent in labelling individuals as terrorists.

There is an inherent tension in the use terrorism and terrorist as a label for individuals and groups. Despite the lack of a commonly agreed upon definition of terrorism both in the academic as well as in the international community, some elements of what constitutes terrorism can be found both in legal definitions as well as academic definitions. These include the threat or the use of force and the aim to advance a political, religious, or ideological cause.²⁴² However, when the label is applied to individuals by states, it is often applied based on the affiliation with terrorist groups. This means that those labelled as such might not all have been actively involved in the actual (threat of the) use of force or have ideological motives. As a result, many individuals labelled as terrorists from a legal or criminal justice perspective cannot be labelled as such from an academic perspective. As terrorism is by definition a label applied to one’s enemies,²⁴³ those labelled as terrorists often include individuals who – without government pressure – would have never turned violent on their own initiative.²⁴⁴ It also means the label is applied to individuals ranging from very ideologically motivated to those motivated by opportunistic reasons and ranging from mentally stable people to individuals suffering from mental illnesses. Finally, it includes both individuals who have used gruesome violence, including murder, as well as individuals who have committed relatively light offenses such as re-tweeting propaganda, or transferring small sums of money. As Kruglanski notes in his research:

the individual that is labelled as a radical or a terrorist is hardly likely to share that perception – they are unlikely to view their ideas, beliefs, or actions as either

²³⁷ Martha Crenshaw, M. (2007). The logic of terrorism. *Terrorism in perspective*, 24, 24-33.

²³⁸ Steven Krasner, (2001). Rethinking the sovereign state model. *Review of International Studies*, 27 (5), 17.

²³⁹ Noam Chomsky, ‘International Terrorism: Image and Reality’, *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 27/28 (1987): 172.

²⁴⁰ Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice* (Leiden University Press, 2015), 87.

²⁴¹ Annamarie Oliverio, *The State of Terror* (SUNY Press, 1998), 146.

²⁴² James C. Simeon, ‘The Evolving Common Law Jurisprudence Combatting the Threat of Terrorism in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada’, *Laws* 8, no. 1 (2019): 5.

²⁴³ Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, ‘Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah, ‘Terrorism’ and the Politics of Perception’, *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 173–97.

²⁴⁴ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 19.

irrational or extreme. "Killing members of an out-group may seem justifiable to the radicalized person in light of her or his cause's subjective importance, but it may hardly seem so to members of the victimized group."²⁴⁵

This necessitates a critical perspective into who exactly has been labelled as such, by whom, and for what reasons.

2.8.3 Lack of attention for individual experiences

Terrorist offenders' individual experiences of historical conflict and its aftermath rarely feature in work on political violence.²⁴⁶ The terrorism studies literature is generally more concerned with organisation and strategy than lived experience.²⁴⁷ As Crenshaw notes in her research agenda for the field of terrorism: "It is not enough simply to propose hypotheses. The study of terrorism still lacks the foundation of extensive primary data based on interviews and life histories of individuals engaged in terrorism."²⁴⁸ While valuable, these studies overlook important emotional and experiential factors that inform processes of sense making on the individual level.

To analyse that process based on primary resources therefore logically necessitates direct contact with individuals who have had this experience. Partially, this is due to the inherent difficulties in doing empirical research in the field of terrorism including for example gaining access to (former) terrorists.²⁴⁹ First of all, the number of terrorists (or radicalised individuals willing to use violence) is very small, and therefore hard to find, let alone interview. Second, access to terrorists is often restricted by governments, who tend to either lock terrorists away in inaccessible maximum security prisons – or, if they are incarcerated in regular prisons or even out on the streets, governments are often wary of allowing researchers access to terrorists for fear of reputational damage or terrorists seeking an audience.

While that is not in any way impossible;²⁵⁰ it is not just a matter of identifying and gaining access to individuals who (might) have been involved in illegal and sometimes violent acts, it also requires time and investment in building trust.²⁵¹ Government agencies are often reluctant to provide researchers with access to terrorist offenders due to security considerations²⁵² and even when access is guaranteed, not all terrorists are willing to cooperate with external researchers. Doing fieldwork in non-Western contexts raises some extra barriers while at the same time reducing others. Access is in some cases more easily gained in non-Western contexts, because for example the sheer number of terrorist offenders is much higher or because security regulations are less stringent. The willingness to talk to outsiders is often also greater in countries where the main issue for terrorist offenders in prison is a combination of lack of judicial progress, congestion, and boredom. At the same

²⁴⁵ Arie W. Kruglanski et al., 'The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism', *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (n.d.): 69–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163>.

²⁴⁶ Thus engaging with the research subject on the human level, something that conflict-studies author Sara Roy labeled 'humanizing the other' Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, viii.

²⁴⁷ Crenshaw, 'The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century'.

²⁴⁸ Crenshaw, 410.

²⁴⁹ John Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research," in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London / New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 30; Silke, "The Devil You Know," 2.

²⁵⁰ Horgan, "Interviewing the Terrorists," 195–211.

²⁵¹ Alessandro Orsini, "A Day among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (2013): 337–51; Harmonie Toros, "Terrorists, Scholars and Ordinary People: Confronting Terrorism Studies with Field Experiences," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2008): 279–80, 86–90.

²⁵² Marc Sageman, 'Low Return on Investment', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (1 September 2014): 616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895655>.

time, the potential dangers can be very high, again because of less stringent security procedures.²⁵³ Finally, cultural barriers including but not limited to language barriers and misunderstanding can provide further challenges to gathering primary source material from individual terrorists.

Those researchers who did publish empirical studies focusing on radicalisation or disengagement from terrorism have mainly used direct, often semi-structured, interviews as a method.²⁵⁴ The semi-structured nature of the interviews generally ensures a structured approach to the interviews, allowing the researcher to identify common themes, while at the same time allowing for flexibility within each interview. The number of studies in the field that have an empirical basis have generally taken a qualitative research approach, an approach that is deemed suitable for studying terrorism and will therefore also be adopted in this study. As Neumann and Kleinmann note: “Indeed, for ‘micro phenomena’ such as terrorism and radicalisation, the use of qualitative methodologies—such as detailed case studies and narratives—may, in many cases, be more appropriate and produce more valid results than the construction of large—and largely meaningless—datasets.”²⁵⁵

In terrorism research, the narrative approach is not dominant. A number of studies using the narrative approach have been conducted, including De Bruijn’s edited volume on Sub-Saharan biographies of radicalisation,²⁵⁶ Della Porta’s study of social movement activists, and Argomaniz and Lynch’ study on victim narratives.²⁵⁷ Nonetheless, this is still a minority approach in the field and when the narrative approach is adopted it does not always rely on primary sources.²⁵⁸ The narrative approach is more often used in criminological research focused on other offender groups.²⁵⁹ Within terrorism research, the call for the use of narrative methods has also increased in the past years.²⁶⁰ The field of terrorism still tends to neglect this wider social, political, and cultural context and the effect this has on the individual and their desistance process. In 2017, Pemberton and Aarten made the cases for increasing narrative-oriented research when analysing political violence in general, and terrorism specifically, arguing that “the construction of a coherent life story is one of the most important elements of an individual’s personality development from adolescence

²⁵³ Dolnik, “Conducting Field Research,” 4; Horgan, “The Case for Firsthand Research,” 48-50; Frederick Schulze, “Breaking the Cycle: Empirical Research and Postgraduate Studies on Terrorism,” *ibid.*, 181-82.

²⁵⁴ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, ‘Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (2013): 16.

²⁵⁵ Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalisation Research?”, *Democracy and Security* 9, nr. 4 (2013): 378.

²⁵⁶ Mirjam De Bruijn, *Biographies De La Radicalisation: Des Messages Cachés Du Changement Social* (Langaa Publishers, 2018).

²⁵⁷ Donatella Della Porta, ‘Life Histories in the Analysis of Social Movement Activists’, *Studying Collective Action*, 1992, 168–93; David Canter, Sudhanshu Sarangi, and Donna Youngs, ‘Terrorists’ Personal Constructs and Their Roles: A Comparison of the Three Islamic Terrorists’, *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2014): 160–78; Javier Argomaniz and Orla Lynch, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: The Complexity of Terrorism—Victims, Perpetrators and Radicalization’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 7 (3 July 2018): 491–506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1311101>.

²⁵⁸ For example Melissa Deary’s book based on the autobiographical accounts of radicalized actors: Melissa Deary, *Radicalisation: The life writings of political prisoners* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2009).

²⁵⁹ In narrative criminology Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, vol. 6 (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2001). is generally perceived as a foundational work; see also Hubert JM Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio, ‘Self, Identity, and Globalization in Times of Uncertainty: A Dialogical Analysis.’, *Review of General Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2007): 31.

²⁶⁰ Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, ‘Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014): 100–110; Orla Lynch, ‘British Muslim Youth: Radicalisation, Terrorism and the Construction of the “Other”’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 2 (2013): 241–61; Peter Clough et al., *Researching Life Stories: Method, Theory and Analyses in a Biographical Age* (Routledge, 2004).

onward.”²⁶¹ According to the authors, the relevance for terrorism research lies in how individuals construct their own narratives around conceptions of victimisation and identity. They argue that these life stories are often not necessarily true in the sense that they provide a literal account of historical facts, but they provide a framework within which the individual frames his or her identity and that provides meaning.

As concluded in the theoretical framework, most theories of involvement in terrorism provide an explanation on just one level – the individual, group, or structural level. In line with Pemberton and Aarten, the value of the narrative approach to study involvement in terrorism is that it does not confine itself to one of those levels but instead, it focuses on how an individual explains his own process of involvement taking into account the role of his social, cultural, and political context as well as any macro level, structural factors that might have played a role. As such, it allows for an individual explanation of how factors on all three levels play a role in the meaning-making process and the construction of one’s identity around those factors. In doing so, the narrative approach also allows the research to go beyond the question of asking what factors play a role in involvement in terrorism and instead, asking the question of why some factors become important to individuals to the extent that they become a push or a pull factor towards involvement in terrorism. This is in line with the conclusion regarding the body of literature on involvement in terrorism that individual explanations of involvement are by definition subjective and depend on the perceptions of those involved.

2.9 Conclusion

Overall, what most theories aiming to explain involvement in terrorism have in common is that they provide an explanation on only one level – whether it be the micro, meso, or macro level, which constitutes an oversimplification of a very complex process. As a result, most of the criticisms touch on this point, criticising micro level explanations for not taking into account the role of the wider social and political context, and blaming the meso and macro level for overemphasising the role of structural, environmental factors, and playing down individual agency. The main conclusion of this theoretical review is thus threefold: (1) involvement in terrorism, from a Western perspective, is an individual trajectory that is influenced by context, group dynamics, and structural factors; (2) this trajectory is never a linear process following a number of pre-identifiable steps but rather a dynamic process including many bends in the road, lapses and re-lapses, pauses, triggers, and environmental influences that altogether can push an individual towards engaging in terrorism; and (3) that individual explanations or descriptions of this process are by definition subjective and depend on the perceptions of those involved.

The combination of a lack of primary sources and non-Western research samples in this field, as well as an often-uncritical approach to researching those labelled as terrorists, necessitate a qualitative research approach that allows for an in-depth inquiry into those labelled as terrorists, based on primary data in a non-Western context. This study aims to increase our understanding of how involvement is affected by structural, group, and individual factors in Mali. The next chapter will elaborate the methodological approach taken in this thesis and chapter four will place this research in its specific context by providing a description of the history, geography, political, and security situation in Mali. The second part of this study, chapters five to seven, present the empirical data that was gathered through narrative interviews on the factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism in the Malian context.

²⁶¹ Antony Pemberton and Pauline GM Aarten, ‘Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 7 (2018): 541–56.

