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## **The four principles of radicalisation studies in the Twenty-First Century**

Abbas, T.

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Prof. Dr. Tahir Abbas

# The Four Principles of Radicalisation Studies in the Twenty-First Century



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Bij ons leer je de wereld kennen

# The Four Principles of Radicalisation Studies in the Twenty-First Century

The inaugural lecture by

**Prof. Dr. Tahir Abbas**

by acceptance of the position of Professor

Radicalisation Studies

at the Universiteit Leiden

on Monday 6 February 2023.



**Universiteit  
Leiden**



To my Rector Magnificus and esteemed guests, it is with tremendous honour and privilege that I stand here before you in this great hall, delivering this inaugural lecture to my dear colleagues, friends, and family.

It is always a special occasion when so many significant people are gathered in one room, but more so when they are here for me to hear my meditations on all manner of intellectual content.

I want to begin by thanking the Institute of Security and Global Affairs and, specifically, my colleagues from the terrorism and political violence group, who had the gumption to hire me all those years ago. Here, I am looking at my colleagues Edwin Bakker, Bart Schuurman, Jelle van Buuren, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Sanneke Kuipers for having the wisdom to score me so highly on the interview panel. And ever since then, I have had the space and time to pursue my work at the highest of levels while engaging with some of the finest students and scholars anywhere, whose job it is to ask me challenging questions while I push them to pursue the boundaries of existing knowledge.

I also want to thank the Institute Scientific Director, Joachim Koops, for his steadfast support and dedication in effectively putting me in this spot in such a fleeting time. There are numerous other colleagues at the Institute with whom I engage on a day-to-day basis, and you are all fun, fabulous,

and fantastic to have around, and I could not have wished for a better bunch of people to bump heads with. This is, after all, the bastion of freedom.

And now to the task before me, which is to lay out the landscape in relation to understanding the concept of radicalisation and how I see the future of the field of radicalisation studies evolving over the next few years, specifically in relation to how I aim to take it forward.

Being in this part of Western Europe is an important opportunity given the proximity to our European partners and institutions. But also, being in the Netherlands is a very distinct space in relation to operating in the higher education landscape in a way that requires me to be at the forefront of my discipline while education itself continues to evolve through ever more colourful ways of teaching, learning, assessing, and researching. That is, it is only within a place such as the Institute for Security and Global Affairs and a university such as Leiden that it is possible to carve out the field of radicalisation studies in the way that I am proposing to do so.

Just like the Institute, the field of radicalisation studies is not necessarily to be pinned down into a pigeonhole or as a subfield of another major discipline such as international relations, political science, security studies, sociology, anthropology, or even psychology, but rather, radicalisation

studies is at the cusp of the intersection of these disciplines. Given the extensive focus on the concept of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism since the events of 9/11, which is the entry point into this particular field of expertise, thinking about radicalisation has certainly evolved. It began with a very urgent need to understand how terrorism aimed at inducing mass casualties could be best understood and how to limit the problem by focusing on reversing strands of ideological thinking while cutting off the head of the snake, which is at the forefront of networks and associations that tie together a centrally organised structure with its various tentacles across the world.

- 4 Radicalisation at this point in history was all about preventing terrorism. The concept was understood as an outcome that needed to be halted from occurring. But as time has passed, the concept is not just all about the outcome; it also relates to understanding the process. This is partly because much of the dominant thinking and framing of the concept was state-centric and aimed at achieving a set of top-down solutions and interventions to prevent the problems from emerging.

However, the idea of the preventing school was soon replaced with the idea of countering violent extremism, which aims at taking apart the opportunity frames in which extremism and potentially terrorism can surface, and this necessarily requires multifaceted and multi-layered

solutions that operate at the level of individuals, communities, societies, and nations. Over a two-decade period, the concept of radicalisation has evolved from the immediate need to eliminate an urgent problem to a better understanding of how it occurs in the first instance and how to prevent the opportunity field from taking hold. So much so that radicalisation studies is a broad field that allows those working in this area to appreciate the problems in terms of a broader range of factors involved, as well as the range of viable solutions that are possible.

I want to take the opportunity today, therefore, to lay out the *four pillars of radicalisation studies* that I believe define the field but also provide the space in which to carve out ongoing new directions and challenges.

These four themes relate to the interdisciplinary study of radicalisation at the levels of structure, culture, the individual, and policymaking. In my view, these are not entirely separate fields, but they have their own unique spaces in which concentrated analysis is increasingly emerging. However, there is always the risk of falling into silo thinking, which has historically harmed the field of terrorism and political violence studies in general, as well as limiting the broader concept of social conflict that underpins individual radicalisation, which, in my analysis, is the only authentic way to appreciate the problem.

As such, radicalisation can never occur in a vacuum. It is always situated within a wider context of social conflict, and this is why the first pillar of radicalisation studies is a focus on structure.

In discussing the role of the structural in radicalisation, a crucial point to appreciate is that this remains very much a Marxian analytical perspective that seeks to underscore the importance of social conflict as the fundamental basis of existence in society. That is, there is a perennial conflict between those who have and wish to hold on to what they have and those who wish to seek and are prepared to struggle for what they wish to materially possess. This is a classic formula that defines the Marxist political economy and sociological model that has remained intact because, fundamentally, at the heart of its formulation is a critique of capitalism, and as capitalism continues to reinvent itself, so does the nature of its critique. While much of the study of capitalism focuses on accumulation through the means of production, there is also a need to appreciate the importance of distribution and exchange.

Capitalism's global reach permits it to affect the lives of every single human on this planet, and with the advent of the flows of capital through digital means, exchange no longer focuses on hard currency but on the transfer of value without any physical content whatsoever. While these

are important debates on the future of money and society, what it means for radicalisation is the immediate concern. In the context of social conflict, some face issues relating to achieving access to the means of production, distribution, and exchange. For such a group of people, who also happen to live in oppressive and subjugated societies, alienation and marginalisation are distinct observations.

It is almost always the case that those who find themselves on a path from radicalisation to terrorism have a justification or explanation based on material realities. That is, 99 per cent of the world's terrorism exists in conflict zones, but those issues of terrorism that exist in the global north do so when there are ideological layers of justification placed on structural marginalisation rationalisations. It is extremely easy to downplay the role of the structural in radicalisation because so many scholars and thinkers have never had to face the hard realities of the daily struggle that so defines the lived realities of so many who are at the margins of society but unable to find a way out through sheer force of mind, body, or soul.

When Muslim minorities are implicated in twenty-first-century terrorism in Europe, the ideological justification is funnelled through a warped religious interpretation that has its roots in the Middle East and in other parts of the Muslim world experiencing their own long-term experiences of

coming out of colonialism and imperialism, often in states in which elites regularly mobilise Islamist ideals to keep the masses at bay. This may well be somewhat of a controversial observation, but we need to be reminded of the fact that sixteen out of the nineteen hijackers on 9/11 had their origins in Saudi Arabia. And the 4,000 European-born Muslims who went to join Islamic State during the mid-2010s were all ‘made in Europe’. The so-called Islamic States functioned as a state, with ministries and policies that very much looked and worked like a state. These European-born Muslims, along with 40,000 others from the rest of the Muslim world, needed an opportunity to be heard and appreciated when their original societies suppressed opportunities for social recognition and acceptance. In Europe, individuals faced the suspension of the realm of possibility in relation to hybrid or multicultural identities on the part of individuals comfortably bridging the reality of a society far removed from that of their parents or grandparents.

The vast majority of European-born Muslims continue to aspire to balance their existence without compromising any sense of being European or Muslim, but some of the structural realities are too great for some, and the consequent effects on the psychology of the vulnerable lead to individuals seeking meaning, belonging, and, in some cases, redemption elsewhere. In such instances, these Muslim minorities are falling

through the cracks of society because there are no protections available to them, even as they are dependent on the abilities and capabilities of those around them to play a role in helping to alleviate their plight. In almost every single case of a young European-born person who entered the Islamic State, and we need to be reminded that the average age was twenty-three, their parents and their immediate community members were the last to know what had gone on. These young people were seduced by the promise of a special place as special people, and they did so without the ability to critically engage or think on their own terms, as they lacked the capacities or sensibilities required to do so. And these are failings at the structural level.

An immediate and important caveat to state here is to remind people that the vast majority of Muslims who face structural marginalisation do not enter into extremism as a way in which to find some kind of solution to their real-world problems. It is only the very few who do so, and it is a combination of structural as well as cultural and individual issues that need to come into play simultaneously that function as triggers. The structural factors are not the smoking gun on their own; the trigger is still at the level of the individual. Before I move on to focusing on the individual, I now wish to say something about the second pillar, which is the cultural realm of radicalisation.



The second level of radicalisation is at the level of culture. In today's world, we often talk about polarisation, which is how social divisions and inequalities are creating cumulative or reciprocal forms of hate, indifference, intolerance, and, in some cases, violent extremism. The problem of culture at this level exists at a societal level inasmuch as the focus on the structures of society creates the wider macro-dynamic conditions in which culture finds its roots.

Radicalisation at the level of culture introduces a further layer of understanding that seeks to connect the individual with the structural. In underscoring the importance of the cultural dynamic in radicalisation, the focus is on the role of the state in creating particular discourses of inclusion or exclusion that manifest themselves in realisations of acceptance or rejection among affected minorities and majorities. It is no surprise that in recent periods in Europe and North America we have seen the rise of the angry young *and* older male majority, whose extremism is a manifestation of hate and intolerance as orchestrated by the designs of states moving ever further to the right.

As economic divisions deepen and women's presence in prominent positions of society grows, including the ability to directly compete with men in the labour market, despite the fact that women outperform men in education and have done so for a generation, men's perceived and actual status has

shifted significantly to the point where a crisis of masculinity has become a fundamental feature of everyday life. Structural globalisation issues have also seen restrictions to expressions of masculinity due to the increased feminisation of the workforce. Men do not work in factories or industrial plants anymore. Particularly in the service sector, whether it is in public or private hands, men sit behind screens all day long in the same way that women do.

While there are economic and sociological forces at work, the biological forces between men and women do not shift so easily. Men's frustrations in the dating game in relation to women have led to hateful actions against women and the blaming of women for their woes in life. Women are able to compete with high-value men in ways that were unavailable to them a generation ago, but the advent of internet communication technologies has meant that men have to fight harder for attention and acceptance. This can cause frustration on an everyday level. It can also lead to violent and hateful vengeance in the form of terrorism. The incel movement in North America is precisely a response to the changing roles of women in society and the marginalised role of men, but without a fundamental change to the biological order between man and woman.

This violence that sits alongside misogyny is also given further credence and viability by

masculinised authoritarian populist states that emphasise the strong and powerful nature of manliness in the functioning of these very same states. In India, the representation of a strong man at the top reveals its origins in hard-line attitudes towards minorities and neighbours of different religious origins. The Hindutva movement in India and among some in the diaspora is also a deeply masculinised movement. In Hungary, Viktor Orban represents himself as the saviour of the nation against all of the fuzzy notions of diversity and inclusion that are seen as weakening states elsewhere. The backlash against diversity, multiculturalism, Black Lives Matter, and other popular social movements that seek to redress the imbalances of society through their voice is rejected by 'traditional' men who fear their replacement by a greater force.

In this substratum of life, where there are wider issues of low education and low skill sets, the conspiratorial brain can take hold. But ironically, the increasing presence of the far right in government power structures has not evaded the role of the far right in shaping the discourse of anti-government protest movements throughout the global north. It is the confirmation of the discourses of intolerance and unacceptance combined with the fears about the future, which are suggested to be at risk due to increasing differences in society, that led to the kinds of events that were witnessed on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021.

Twenty-five years ago, multiculturalism was described as an asset for liberal democracies in their pursuit of human progress in the global world. Fast forward to today, and multiculturalism is seen as a failed project because of the role and presence of unwanted differences that put group identity before shared norms and values. The latter is a metaphor for the reality of failed domestic and foreign policies because the trickle-down neoliberal post-industrial economic growth model does not work and has not done so during the forty years of its inception and implementation. The imaginaries of global elites are stuck in the machine-brain thinking of late 19th-century political economy, resulting in the hubris of nations as they seek to make friends with big business while leaving the poor, infirm, and marginalised minorities and majorities to fend for themselves. In this disjuncture, certain angry people have no real voice in reality but are prepared to believe the unbelievable to alleviate immediate perceived or actual stressors in the hope of a better future.

National cultural models are susceptible to further breakdown at the hands of elites and the privileged few, whose intentions are impure 'because their motivations remain to pursue individual self-interest at the cost of all else. These realities have a particular implication for societies aiming to achieve national cohesion in an interdependent global world. As Benedict Anderson famously penned in the early 1980s, all nations' histories

are imagined, which means that they are selective and organised in a way to champion the primacy of the imagined nation above all else. This lack of imagination is a prelude to ongoing social, political, and economic divisions that have ramifications not only at the cultural level of societies but also at the level of the individual, to whom I now turn in my third pillar of radicalisation studies for the twenty-first century.

The third arm of radicalisation studies is at the level of the individual. In all known cases of radicalisation, however much we focus on issues of history, politics, economy, and society, there is the issue of individual-level triggers that push an individual into a form of ideological conviction that can lead to terrorism and political violence. The contrast often put out on the field is this constant battle between push and pull factors. While much of the orthodoxy that dominated the preventing and countering violent extremism space in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 focused on pull factors, that is, the role of ideology in ultimately pulling people into violence, more and more we are now appreciating the role of push factors, which are necessarily related to structural and cultural issues, but in all cases, there is always an individual-level trigger event.

This is now fertile territory for our colleagues in the fields of social psychology, psychiatry, and mental health to provide us with a better appreciation

of how an individual internalises social injustice and social exclusion and translates that into ideologically informed violent behaviour when, more often than not, the vast majority of people, while acknowledging some of the motivation, ultimately never take that final step to violent extremism. Some have described these as internal brakes, and these can exist at the individual level but can also be situated within the milieus in which individuals find themselves, such as families, communities, and neighbourhoods.

There are many hundreds of thousands of people who possess all of the structural inequality realities that might motivate some to engage in violence, but only a handful do, and this is because of individual-level events. The issues of trauma, issues of abandonment as a child, concerns around mental health, the widespread occurrence of autism, and psychological damage incurred as a result of various issues are real concerns. This is not to say that people with psychological issues are as susceptible to extremism as people with strong religious convictions are to religiously inspired extremism. Indeed, it is important to remain careful about making generalisations, but without a doubt, there are clearly many matters to consider and explore further at the level of the individual in the context of their immediate social and cultural contexts that can help to better appreciate how we might understand the problems of radicalisation and what we might do about them.

This leads me to the fourth and final pillar of radicalisation studies, which is the policy-making perspective. It would be all fine and well for some if academics could only ever author their flowery papers for high-ranking journals and talk to themselves in elaborate conferences. This is a futile exercise in many ways, but not so much that it discourages most academics. That is, if we do not translate what we find in our social scientific studies into meaningful policy implications, then there will be ongoing problems with policy thinking and analysis that continue to be made despite the improved knowledge that we have about a particular subject. It would be an inordinate waste of public money for academics to simply talk amongst themselves for their own limited egotistical pleasures. What a world that would be.

There's nothing wrong with pure and absolute academic thinking, and there is always room for lengthy monographs and expanded ideas that push the boundaries of theoretical and conceptual thinking. But in a field such as radicalisation studies, we need to be talking to policymakers at all sorts of levels, whether it is at the level of the municipality, central government, or even international bodies such as the UN and all of their attempts at introducing diktat and establishing discourse around violent extremism. Academics must act as a critical friend. Being co-opted by the state is never healthy in radicalisation studies, however, especially as there is a strong and

significant field of critique that attempts to expose the state-centric biases of all the counter-terrorist states that often reproduce misunderstandings and misjudgements in relation to dealing with the problems of extremism.

The academy must speak directly to policymaking audiences in these terms, but it must also be able to sit down together in a room and say, 'We have found these particular understandings that will be relevant to you, so please listen and learn. You will benefit, as will society as a whole. I am your critical friend'.

These four layers, the understanding of the structural, the cultural, the individual, and the institutional, will necessarily define what we do in the study of radicalisation. How we do it will continue to be at the margins and at the intersections of the fields of international relations, political science, security studies, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. There will also be moments in which we are far more engaged in responding to immediate and urgent problems, as in the events of 9/11, the terrorist incidences in the mid-2000s in Europe, and then again at the end of the 2010s when it was back with a vengeance, and so we have to raise our heads above the parapet and seek to be heard urgently, but there are also times when we need to sit back in our comfortable chairs and think hard about what just happened and what might be happening again in the near future

through our dedicated theoretical and conceptual thinking around these issues.

I am right in the middle of the busiest and most challenging period of my intellectual life. This is the most exciting and most nerve-wracking space I have been in, but it is exactly where I wanted to be, and I am doing precisely what I wanted to do in an institution that provides me with all of the resources that I need. My job is to continue producing excellent work, not only in the best journals in my field but also to continue knocking on policymakers' doors to remind them of the importance of keeping their approach balanced and correct.

When I was young, I used to think that things never changed, people never changed, but everything was in a constant state of flux. When I got to the end of my doctorate in my late twenties, it was more the case that things did really change, but people did not really change; only circumstances did. Now that I am firmly in my early fifties, I realise that all things change all the time. Matters have altered dramatically since I was a child in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Cold War was still raging, when nuclear weapons were discussed on political talk shows every weekend, when traditional post-war warfare model norms were being ripped apart and replaced with championing the individual, and people adapted

well or were left behind in a survival of the fittest dynamic that could be described as monetary policy, neoliberalism, and globalisation.

Today, remnants of the Cold War persist in a war on European soil not so far from here. Society is more divided than it has ever been as capital is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and oligarchic power shifts government policy to the whims and fantasies of the uber-elites. All the while, human beings are not passive recipients of this onslaught against freedoms and liberties, and I am referring here to the global north because the rest of the world, which is most of the world, is the global south, and that continues to struggle in very different ways from the individual-level problems that we find ourselves facing here in Europe. But what is also interesting is that human brains have transformed. Students in my classes have no living memory of issues of terrorism other than the war on terror and all that it has brought into their lives. The same students do not know a world without the internet and mobile communications. The same young people also learn very differently than I did at school over four decades ago. No more chalk on the board, where exams involved three-hour handwritten essays all the way into my master's degree. Today's young people have digitally wired brains in ways that are beyond what I could have imagined, and these continue to evolve at a rapid rate.

As someone who has spent the vast majority of their intellectual development time in departments of sociology, my political sociological critique of the state and its policies and practises has remained intact, and it continues to be significant in my appreciation of the study of radicalisation in today's world. Much of what we understand and value in terms of radicalisation exists as a result of states' failures to look after and support minorities and majorities on the margins of societies that continue to widen rather than come together as oligarchic powers erode governments' ability to provide checks and balances against the rudimentary but always predictable forces of neoliberal capitalism.

12 So, with this, I come full circle to the pillars of radicalisation, which focus on the structural, the role of the nation, and the cultural representation of its people as a basis for an individual to react to their structural marginalisation with individually motivated violence that seeks to redress a sense of themselves lost in the workings of society. It is an acute irony that some resort to self-annihilation to determine a sense of self-actualisation and self-realisation. While these challenges can be neatly understood across European landscapes, they also exist throughout the rest of the world where there are even greater polarities and divisions at play and, often, terrorism is merely a reality of conflict zones that have a deep history of exploitation and misappropriation. Radicalisation focuses on loss, and the need to reclaim a sense of self that is in

opposition to the framing of the other, where this shared space has been lost by forces beyond the individual's control to shape it in their own terms.

I see the direction of the study of radicalisation as a multifaceted and multi-layered approach to social thinking that focuses on the macro, the meso, and the micro, but where it is the individual that faces the brunt of the challenges that face them head on in forms of terrorism and violence, which will continue to maintain our interest in the academy while we remain a critical friend to government and policy thinkers who often need to hear what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear.

Let me leave you with a quote, if I may. Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'learn as if you will live forever, live like you will die tomorrow'. With these words and these thoughts, I am grateful for your time and attention, and I look forward to advancing this research agenda now and for the foreseeable future. Thank you!

## PROF. DR. TAHIR ABBAS



Tahir Abbas, FRSA FAcSS, is currently a Professor of Radicalisation Studies, having joined the Institute of Security and Global Affairs in 2018. Previously, he was a Professor of Sociology at Fatih Istanbul University (2010-2016) and an Associate Professor in Sociology and Director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture at the University of Birmingham (2003-2009). Before that, he was a Senior Research Officer at the UK Home Office and Ministry of Justice, both in London (2000-2003). He has been a visiting scholar at the London School of Economics (2017-2019), New York University (2015-2016), the Graduate School for Islamic Studies of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta (2012), and the University of Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2007-2009). He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and the Academy of Social Sciences (UK).

He is currently focused on the fields of political sociology and critical terrorism studies, exploring various forms of 'radicalisation', extremism, and political violence. His recent books are *Ruminations* (Beacon, 2022), *Islamophobia and Securitisation* (with L. Welten, Springer, 2022), *Countering Violent Extremism* (Bloomsbury, 2021), *Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle* (Oxford University Press), and *Contemporary Turkey in Conflict* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017). Recent peer-reviewed journal articles have appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Studies*

*in Conflict and Terrorism*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Critical Social Policy*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Ethnicities*, and *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. His recently edited books are *Political Muslims* (with S. Hamid, Syracuse University Press, 2019) and *Muslim Diasporas in the West: Critical Readings in Sociology* (4 vols., Routledge Major Works Series, 2016). Professor Abbas has published a total of six monographs, 11 (co)edited books and special issues, 45 scientific articles, 15 encyclopaedia entries, 27 book chapters, and 25 book reviews.

His current major project is as the Scientific Coordinator of the EU-funded H2020 RIA DRIVE project, a 36-month project exploring how social exclusion impacts the radicalisation of far-right and Islamist groups in the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and the United Kingdom. The DRIVE project runs from 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2024. Professor Abbas is also the principal investigator on the European Commission Internal Security Fund-funded project, PROTONE (Protect the Places of Worship—Harmonizing Diversity), which will run from February 2023 to February 2025, and a co-investigator on the European Commission Internal Security Fund-funded project, PREPARE (Promoting collaborative policies of inclusion relating to children of far-right and Islamist parents in Western Europe), which runs from January 2022 to July 2023.



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