

## Articles

# Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link Between Ideas and Violence

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### Abstract

*A central issue with many interpretations of radicalization remains their tendency to overemphasize the role of extremist beliefs in motivating involvement in terrorism. After elaborating on this critique, the authors propose that 'fanaticism', a concept developed by Taylor in the early 1990s, offers a way of overcoming this deficiency in radicalization-based approaches through its conditional understanding of when radical beliefs can lead to violent behavior. Primary-sources driven empirical analysis supports both the critique of radicalization and the discussion of fanaticism's benefits. Results are relevant to both academics and counterterrorism practitioners working to understand the role of extremist beliefs in motivating involvement in terrorist violence.*

**Keywords:** radicalization; fanaticism; beliefs; ideology; religion; terrorism; concepts; political violence; Hofstadgroup; homegrown jihadism

### Introduction

The concept of 'radicalization' has come to dominate debates on the processes leading to involvement in terrorism. Simultaneously, radicalization has attracted considerable criticism on definitional, conceptual and empirical grounds. This article argues that a central shortcoming of radicalization-based thinking remains its tendency to implicitly or explicitly see involvement in terrorism as stemming from the adoption of radical beliefs, even though the vast majority of radicals never become involved in terrorism and not all terrorists are primarily motivated by their beliefs. Two points are made. First, the authors illustrate that the overemphasis on the role of beliefs remains prevalent, despite the recent development of several conceptually and theoretically more nuanced interpretations of radicalization. Second, the concept of 'fanaticism' as developed by Taylor in the early 1990s is revisited precisely because it provides a conditional understanding of when radical beliefs can lead to violent behavior. Through a conceptual discussion supported by primary-sources driven empirical analysis, the authors contribute to the larger debate on the role that convictions can play in motivating involvement in terrorist groups and terrorist violence.

### Background

For well over a decade, academics, policy makers, journalists and the general public have been debating involvement in terrorism as a process characterized by 'radicalization'. [1] The concept's obverse, 'deradicalization', has similarly become central to more recent questions about if and how former terrorists can be re-integrated into society. [2] Despite its ubiquitous use, radicalization has also attracted considerable criticism. [3] Skeptics have noted its inherently subjective nature, the lack of agreement on definitional issues and the sometimes linear and deterministic conceptualizations that made radicalization seem like a 'conveyor belt' to involvement in terrorism. [4] Recent years have seen the development of notably more nuanced interpretations that have

considerably advanced insights into how, why and when people may become involved in terrorism. Even so, a central shortcoming of radicalization has continued to exert a detrimental influence; namely, the frequently found assumption that the adoption of radical beliefs precedes and leads to involvement in terrorism.[5]

Ideologies, whether religious or political in nature, are undoubtedly important to understanding individuals' and groups' decisions about committing acts of terrorist violence. The promise of a utopian future (or as is more likely among today's terrorists, afterlife), the identification of obstacles standing in the way of its realization and the rationalization of violent means as the most effective and indeed only way of overcoming them, allow some belief systems to both motivate and justify terrorism.[6] Shared beliefs also form an important part of the social cohesion that keeps terrorist groups together.[7]

Yet, important as they are, the adoption of radical beliefs alone is not a necessary or sufficient condition for involvement in terrorism. As is illustrated by the references found throughout this paper, and the concrete examples given in later segments, many interpretations of radicalization continue to overstate the role of beliefs in bringing about involvement in terrorism. This conflation of ideas and behavior is problematic for several reasons. Terrorists may have *learned* to describe their motivations in ideological terms during their socialization into the group.[8] Secondly, such justifications may obscure other motivating factors that could be of equal or greater significance. Most importantly, the vast majority of 'radicals' never become involved in terrorism and research has shown that not all terrorists are primarily motivated by their convictions.[9]

The goal of this article is to highlight the ongoing and detrimental influence of this 'specificity gap' and to suggest a way to overcome it. To do so effectively, it is crucial to avoid a straw man argument in which the concept of radicalization is presented without any appreciation for its development over time or the many thoughtful interpretations of it that exist. The focus here is on those conceptualizations of radicalization that see it as a cognitive process of increasing adherence to radical views which is then implicitly or explicitly tied to involvement in terrorism. As discussed later on in this paper, not all interpretations of radicalization are so cognitively focused or tie beliefs to behavior quite so strongly. Yet this particular understanding of radicalization remains entrenched among counterterrorism policy makers in particular and still holds strong in the academic debate, despite the development of more nuanced alternatives.[10] Indeed, the conflation of radical beliefs with radical behavior is argued to be the defining feature of radicalization as it is generally understood.

While demonstrating the ongoing influence of that conflation is useful in itself, this article wants to help move the debate forward by suggesting a way in which the potential for radical beliefs to inspire involvement in terrorist violence can be better understood. To do so, this article revisits the concept of 'fanaticism' as it was developed by Taylor in the early 1990s.[11] Although fanaticism might at first glance appear to be merely radicalization under a different name, this concept makes the ability of radical ideas to influence behavior conditional on a number of contextual factors. It also provides a practicable way of assessing the *degree* to which fanatical beliefs influence a particular individual. Taken together, these elements endow 'fanaticism' with the specificity lacking in those interpretations of radicalization that conflate the adoption of radical beliefs with involvement in radical behavior.

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**Outline**

This article was inspired by the first author's PhD thesis on how and why involvement in a Dutch homegrown jihadist group called the 'Hofstadgroup' came about.[12] While researching and writing this project, the utility of the radicalization concept was repeatedly drawn into question. This sparked an interest in critically exploring the concept's origins and development in more detail, both in relation to its use in academia as well as among counterterrorism policymakers. Owing to its origins in the PhD, this article draws on the Hofstadgroup as a case study at two points in these pages: first as a demonstration of radicalization's limited utility and, several pages later, to advocate the benefits of fanaticism as a different conceptualization of the potential for beliefs to inspire terrorist violence.

Before turning to these examples, the study's methodology is briefly outlined and an expanded critique of 'radicalization'-based explanations for involvement in terrorism is provided. This critique first takes a look at the etymology of radicalization to help untangle radicalism from the related concepts extremism and terrorism. [13] Next, a brief overview of the development of the radicalization concept will emphasize that the debate has certainly not been stagnant, nor can it be reduced to one-dimensional perspectives. Still, despite the emergence of more nuanced conceptualizations, the conflation of radical beliefs with involvement in terrorism continues to be dominant among counterterrorism policy makers and practitioners, as well as within significant parts of the academic debate. Using examples from the academic literature and government documents, the last part of the critique will demonstrate this problematic state of affairs to underline the need to develop alternative approaches.

Subsequently, the Hofstadgroup case study is introduced. It provides an example of an act of terrorist violence that, at first glance, epitomizes those interpretations of radicalization which see the adoption of radical beliefs as a precursor to involvement in violent behavior. Closer inspection, however, reveals it to be a practical example of radicalization's tendency to conflate ideas and behavior to an unwarranted degree. Following this first use of the case study as a demonstration of radicalization's limitations, the concept of fanaticism is introduced. Once its contours have been outlined, the Hofstadgroup is brought back in and used to demonstrate fanaticism's considerable utility for addressing why only some of those who hold radical views will act on them. The conclusion summarizes these arguments and briefly discusses the practical utility of fanaticism for the counterterrorism community.

**Methodology**

This study is qualitative in nature and draws primarily on a literature review. The critique of radicalization is based upon articles, books and 'grey literature' found through a Google Scholar search that was expanded using snowballing, whereby promising references in the material found on Google Scholar were followed up. The Hofstadgroup case study is based on an in-depth assessment of primary-sources; namely the Dutch police files on the group and semi-structured interviews with former participants. Both of these types of sources were originally studied for the first author's PhD thesis and revisited for the purposes of this study.

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## ***A Critique of Radicalization***

### ***Epistemology: Radicalism, Extremism and Terrorism***

The origins of the contemporary use of radicalization within the policymaker and academic debate on terrorism can be traced to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The previously popular ‘root causes’ approach to discussing the origins of terrorism gradually made way for ‘radicalization’, in part because the former was deemed by some to imply a degree of understanding for the perpetrators’ motives.[14] Radicalization began to dominate the debate after the 2004 Madrid attacks and 2005’s bombing of London’s public transportation system. From the outset, the conflation of ideas and behavior was apparent.[15] The classic example of this early thinking on radicalization is the definition found in an influential 2007 study published by the New York Police Department, which referred to a ‘progression of searching, finding, adopting, nurturing, and developing [an] extreme belief system to the point where it acts as a catalyst for a terrorist act’ and is subdivided into four distinct stages.[16]

Set within a broader historical context, the alleged links between radical thoughts and violent behavior are far from clear. Etymologically, radicalism stems from the Latin word ‘radix’, which can be translated as ‘root’ and which in turn speaks to some of the connotations that radicalism conjures, such as fundamental, thorough, drastic and rigorous. Bötticher finds that, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, radicalism was associated with anti-establishment political doctrines that were in large part progressive and emancipatory in nature. While opponents often imbued it with negative connotations, this modern radicalism played an important role in bringing about changes such as voting rights for women that are today part and parcel of mainstream thinking in Western democracies.[17]

Throughout its development over the past two centuries, radicalism tended to advocate far-reaching or even fundamental changes without calling for the complete overthrow or destruction of the existing socio-political order. In terms of how to achieve those goals, radicalism is not an intellectual position that is *inherently* in favor of violence as the most suitable means, even though some radicals certainly propagated its use. There is a case to be made for the position that non-violent radicalism could be seen as being part and parcel of healthy democratic societies.[18] The much more recent conflation of radicalism with terrorism is therefore quite problematic, as it lumps together individuals, groups and ideas that can and have advocated for progressive societal change with the motivations and justifications for a widely-deplored form of political violence. This conflation appears to stem, at least in part, from confusion over the related concept of extremism.

The opinions of radicals may be disagreeable or even abhorrent, but as long as radicals retain a basic adherence to the democratic political order, they could be considered a healthy if at times disconcerting part of that order. In contrast, extremism is a way of thinking that accepts no compromise, sees no middle ground and warrants no limitations on its objectives or means for achieving them. As Schmid aptly summarizes and defines extremism, “[w]hile radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. Their state of mind tolerates no diversity. They are also positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power (...). Extremists generally tend to have inflexible ‘closed minds’, adhering to a simplified mono-causal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them, part of the problem or part of the solution.”[19]

Because it is much more closely tied to a belief in the efficacy of violence, extremism more accurately describes

convictions liable to see terrorism as justified and necessary. Still, it would be inaccurate to argue that extremism necessarily leads to terrorism or that all terrorists are ideological extremists for many of the same reasons that apply to radicalism. Radicalism and extremism are perhaps best seen as different points on a scale that reflects the degree to which violence is seen as legitimate and necessary to achieve far-reaching change. This allows a distinction to be made between those who pursue far-reaching change and *might* see violence as legitimate under certain circumstances (radicals) and those who will *always* favor the use of violence to achieve what they want (extremists). The terms radicalism and extremism are used in this fashion throughout the remainder of this article.

When these concepts influence behavior, they *may* lead to terrorism. Terrorism is a heavily debated concept that suffers from being highly subjective, politicized and frequently used to designate non-state actors only. Because it is careful to avoid these pitfalls, Schmid's 2011 'academic consensus definition' on terrorism recommends itself as a way to further clarify the issues at stake. "Terrorism refers on the one hand to a **doctrine** about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial **practice** of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties." [20]

Seen in this light, terrorism is neither solely the realm of non-state actors or the domain of ideological extremists. It is essentially a type of warfare that any party to a conflict can adopt when they believe it to be in their best interests. [21] Terrorism is a tactic; a particular way of using deadly force that can stem from extremist beliefs just as much as it can be adopted for reasons of expediency. [22] For instance, the strategic bombing campaigns carried out by WWII belligerents in part deliberately targeted civilian populations to hurt and demoralize them to the extent that they would push their governments to sue for peace. Such deliberate use of terror stemmed from a pragmatic perspective on the use air power, rather than from extremist convictions. In short, it is inaccurate to conflate radical or extremist beliefs with involvement in terrorist violence. Not all extremists become terrorists and not all terrorists are ideological extremists. It is this dual disconnect between ideas and behavior that is at the heart of the debate about radicalization.

### ***The Evolution of Radicalization***

It would certainly be inaccurate to argue that all researchers simplify the relationship between beliefs and behavior. Over the past decade, various scholars [23] and government agencies [24] have come to see radicalization more broadly as the process leading up to involvement in terrorism. In Horgan's case, for example, "violent radicalisation (...) encompasses the phases of a) becoming involved with a terrorist group and b) remaining involved and engaging in terrorist activity." [25] For Kruglanski et al., radicalization is "a movement in the direction of *supporting* or *enacting* radical behavior." [26] McCauley and Moskalenko view it as "increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict." [27] Several relatively complex models for involvement in terrorism, such as Moghaddam's 'staircase' and McCauley and Moskalenko's 'pyramid' models fit this interpretation of 'radicalization', even though some of their authors never used this terminology. [28] In a way, these authors see radicalization as encompassing everything that happens "before the bomb goes off." [29]

Alongside this broader conceptualization of radicalization as the process of becoming involved in terrorism,



several schools of thought have developed with regard to its potential drivers. Koehler identifies four such approaches. Firstly, sociological perspectives have stressed the influence of environmental conditions. Secondly, social movement theory has emphasized the role of 'radical milieus', small-group dynamics and antagonistic competition with the state as driving forces. Thirdly, empirical approaches have looked at radicalization inductively and drawn attention to the variety of personal characteristics, backgrounds and involvement pathways found among participants in terrorist groups. Psychological perspectives, finally, have turned to the influence of such factors as (relative) deprivation, altruism, identification with the victims of perceived injustice and the various emotional, cognitive and social benefits of group membership to account for involvement pathways.[30] Among psychological factors, the experience of personal crises is particularly interesting as the potential 'spark' that may explain why only some individuals adopt extremist beliefs and violent modes of behavior, even though many more are exposed to similar circumstances.[31]

Moreover, research has highlighted and begun to explore the heterogeneity of involvement processes. Not only can people become involved in terrorism for a variety of reasons, but 'involvement' itself takes a multitude of forms.[32] More participants in terrorist groups are involved with fund-raising, recruitment, propaganda and logistic than are actually planting bombs or shooting people.[33] The factors governing such role allocation, and the reasons why people might adopt, abandon or switch between such roles, form fascinating new areas of study and are a further reminder of the complexity of the issues at stake.

These developments have underlined that involvement in terrorism stems from heterogeneous processes in which a multitude of factors, at various levels of analysis, play a role. This has enabled an analytical scope that extends beyond the narrow confines of the individual and his or her internalization of evermore radical or extremist beliefs. Indeed, the emphasis on the individual found in many approaches to radicalization may have made us underemphasize the many relevant factors found at the group and structural levels of analysis.[34] As Bartlett and Miller argue, involvement in terrorism is not just an intellectual process of adopting extremist beliefs, but one in which social, emotional and status-related factors play an important role.[35]

One particular area in which a nuanced understanding regarding the role of beliefs vis-à-vis involvement in terrorism has developed, concerns research on deradicalization and disengagement. With increasing numbers of returning foreign fighters as well as considerable numbers of homegrown radicals and extremists, many affected governments have been keen to create programs to reduce the chances of terrorism-related recidivism. Many of these initiatives rely in part or entirely on the problematic notion that, as extremist beliefs guide involvement in terrorism, desistance from this form of political violence must be predicated on weaning away individuals from those convictions; 'deradicalizing' them so that they no longer believe that violence is justified and necessary.[36]

Research in this field has repeatedly shown, however, that the reasons why people may choose to abandon terrorism are as diverse as those that led to involvement in the first place. Frequently, they do not (primarily) revolve around a change in beliefs, but may be predicated on disillusionment with the efficacy of violence, strife with other group members, or the desire to build a career or create a family outside of the confines of terrorism. Essentially, terrorist may 'disengage' behaviorally from using or supporting terrorism while remaining committed to their extremist worldviews.[37] Drawing attention to this crucial distinction has had significant consequences for the design, implementation and evaluation of re-integration or rehabilitation

efforts for terrorist and extremists. Such research embodies the considerable strides that have been made in the study of this form of political violence since ‘radicalization’ was first coined.

### *Enduring Issues in Research and Practice*

Clearly, there are trends in radicalization research that have moved it beyond its conceptually narrow origins. Yet, in addition to interpretations of radicalization that see it as essentially encompassing the processes that can lead to involvement in terrorism, a second and perhaps more prevalent perspective sees radicalization as the internalization of radical or extremist beliefs.[38] Neumann, for instance, argues that “at the most basic level, radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists.”[39] Similarly, Sloodman and Tillie, as well as Buijs and Demant, see radicalization as a process centered on the ‘delegitimization’ of the established societal and political order, leading to a desire for radical change that in its most extreme form could include the use of violence.[40] Horgan distinguishes ‘violent radicalization’ from ‘radicalization’, with the latter signifying the “social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology.”[41]

Here the core of the issue becomes apparent. While none of the above authors claim that the adoption of radical or extremist convictions necessarily leads to involvement in terrorist behavior, such a link is often implied[42] and frequently explicated by others in the broader literature on terrorism.[43] The classic example remains Silber and Bhatt’s work and their argument that the adoption of extremist beliefs acts as a catalyst for involvement in terrorism.[44] But such a view is not an anachronistic holdover from radicalization’s early days. In 2010, Dalgaard-Nielsen wrote of ‘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.”[45] The same year, Neumann typified it as “the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims.”[46]

Other more recent examples include the multinational EU-funded ‘Safire’ project, which used a 2002 definition by the European Council and saw radicalization as “the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.”[47] In their 2016 book, Koomen and Van der Pligt add a qualification but still tie beliefs to behavior by arguing that radicalization “is the development of belief in opinions, views and ideas that might well result in a person committing acts of terror.”[48]

This problem is more pronounced in government circles, where it is also more pernicious due to the interventions and policies that are actually implemented based on these assumptions.[49] The German Federal Police (BKA) sees it as “the increasing adoption among individuals and groups of an extremist way of thinking and action and the growing willingness to support and / or use illegitimate means, including the use of force, to achieve their objectives.”[50] In a 2015 document on the UK government’s ‘prevent’ strategy, radicalization is defined as “the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups.”[51]

The Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) outlined a similar perspective on radicalization in 2014, namely as “an attitude that entails the willingness to accept the ultimate consequences of a system of thought and to transmute them into action.”[52] For the European Commission, “violent radicalisation’ entails people ‘embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.”[53]

As a final example, it is interesting to note that some non-governmental organizations operating in the field of radicalization prevention also hold to similar interpretations. For instance, the Montreal based Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization leading to Violence (CPRLV) explicitly states that radicalization entails “[t]he merging of ideology and violent action.”[54]

Few of those who have studied radicalization in depth will argue that beliefs alone are sufficient to explain involvement in terrorism. Likewise, not all government definitions directly conflate radicalism with violence. [55] Yet, as the examples given above demonstrate, within the academic as well as the counterterrorism policy maker and practitioner communities, an overemphasis on the role of ideas is still present.[56]

The conflation of ideas with behavior is not only conceptually problematic, as previous sections have discussed, but empirically poorly supported.[57] Opinion surveys have found adherence to radical Islamist beliefs to be unrelated with support for terrorism.[58] Strikingly, research has also shown that not all those who *do* become terrorists are (primarily) motivated by extremist ideologies.[59] This applies even to some instances of suicide terrorism, a form of violence that would at first glance appear to be the archetypical example of extremist beliefs put into practice.[60] Moreover, several scholars have argued that policies and programs intended to counter or prevent radicalization have unduly stigmatized Muslim communities.[61] Radicalization’s definitional, conceptual and empirical issues are therefore far from a matter of mere academic importance.

### ***Radicalization’s Gap Between Convictions and Behavior in Practice***

Having outlined the various concerns with radicalization as a concept, the following paragraphs turn to the Hofstadgroup case to provide a brief illustration of its limitations in practice. The Hofstadgroup was an ambiguously defined group consisting of approximately 40 individuals, centered on smaller hard-core of committed Salafi-Jihadist extremists. Although active in numerous Dutch cities, the group was named by the Dutch security and intelligence agency AIVD using a colloquial reference to The Hague, where many meetings took place.[62]

During the first two years of its existence, the group’s most militant participants were focused on traveling to jihadist groups in Chechnya and Afghanistan as foreign fighters. Unlike the more recent generation of jihadist travelers, these Hofstadgroup participants were unable to reach their destinations, in large part because traveling to Chechnya and Afghanistan in 2002-2003 was considerably more difficult than reaching Syria was until relatively recently. In early 2004, after these attempts at joining the jihad abroad had failed, some of the group’s inner circle began to conduct preparations for bringing jihad to the Netherlands instead. Several plots were developed, but the one that came to fruition was the November 2004 murder of the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh. In the wake of this attack, the police arrested most the group’s participants. In 2005, a ‘second generation’ of the group emerged that once again began developing terrorist plots. This led to a second round of arrests in October 2005 that brought the group to its definite end.[63]

The Hofstadgroup had too many idiosyncratic qualities to truly embody the moniker of a ‘quintessential’[64] example of homegrown jihadism it was once given.[65] But although it may not be *the* blueprint for European homegrown jihadism, it still remains an instructive case from which to develop insights into this broader trend.



The group's loose organizational structure and its participants' capacity for terrorist violence despite their lack of (significant) paramilitary training or experience, make it a representative example of a subset of homegrown jihadism that has included numerous groups with similar attributes.[66] Furthermore, the ambitions of the group's militant inner circle to become foreign fighters, tie it directly to one of the most notable aspects of the current jihadist threat. Finally, the murder of Van Gogh arguably was a key influence on the radicalization debate because the perpetrator was indeed strongly influenced by his beliefs.[67]

The case is also interesting because the first author of the present paper was able to study it in-depth using primary sources. These include the extensive files collated by the Dutch police during its various investigations into this group in the 2003-2005 period. Additionally, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with former participants, one set of which is drawn upon here. Such data remains underutilized in research on terrorism and allows this case to offer detailed and empirically-substantiated insights.[68] Thus, although an older case, the Hofstadgroup is still well-suited to support the arguments made here. The following paragraphs discusses three Hofstadgroup participants whose use, or planned use of, terrorist violence places them squarely in its militant inner-circle and makes them especially well-suited to assessing the potential for extremist beliefs to motivate terrorist attacks.

At first glance, a reconstruction of the process through which Van Gogh's murderer came to embrace violence appears to underline the validity of radicalization-based thinking. His attacker was a 26-years old Dutchman called Mohammed Bouyeri, who had gone from an apparently well-integrated member of society to a violent Islamist extremist in the space of several years. In the early 2000s, Bouyeri was enrolled in higher education, participating in community service and enjoying a lifestyle in which religion did not appear to play a big role. He was, however, prone to violent outbursts. In 2001, this culminated in Bouyeri stabbing a police officer in an Amsterdam park, for which he was sentenced to several months imprisonment later that year.[69]

This turn of events, and in particular the death of Bouyeri's mother later that same year, brought about a self-described 'search for truth' that led to a reorientation on his Islamic faith. Between early 2002 and the murder of Van Gogh in November 2004, Bouyeri rapidly adopted an increasingly fundamentalist, then radical and ultimately clearly extremist interpretation of Islam. Among the tenets of his newfound religious beliefs, was the conviction that the murder of blasphemers was not merely justified and necessary in an abstract sense, but an obligation he had to carry out personally. The many writings and translations left behind by Bouyeri are a further tribute to the key role played by extremist beliefs in motivating his act of terrorist violence.[70] As he told his family in a farewell letter, he had carried out the attack in order to "fulfill my duty to Allah and to trade my soul for paradise." [71]

Radicalization, understood as a cognitive process in which the adoption of extremist beliefs precedes involvement in terrorist violence, therefore appears to offer a convincing explanation for the pathway that led to the filmmaker's death. But although it is highly applicable to this particular individual, radicalization loses much of its explanatory abilities when applied as a framework to study the pathways that led other participants in the Hofstadgroup to become involved. Not only did the majority of the participants in this radical group with an extremist inner-circle never act on their beliefs, the motives of the inner-circle militants who did plan to commit acts of terrorist violence show the influence of a host of factors besides extremist beliefs alone.

One young man's example is particularly revealing with regard to the variety and fluidity of the factors driving

the process that led to involvement in the group and, ultimately, arrest on terrorism-related charges.[72] To ensure his privacy and safety, the following description has been anonymized. His process towards involvement in the Hofstadgroup began when the individual in question was unable to obtain the internship needed to complete his studies, to his mind because of labor-market discrimination against people of Moroccan descent. Interestingly, this experience did not motivate involvement but enabled it; left with an abundance of idle time, he visited mosques more often. This led him to become acquainted with an older Syrian man who convinced him that his failure to get an internship had nothing to do with his Moroccan background, but was instead related to his being a Muslim in a land of unbelievers. Seeing he had piqued the individual's interest, this Syrian man then put him in touch with the Hofstadgroup.

At least initially, it was not the radical and extremist discussions being held at Hofstadgroup gatherings that bound this individual to the group. Instead, he simply enjoyed spending time with people who he got along well with. Only gradually did he adopt the Salafi-Jihadist convictions brandished by the group's inner-circle. Group-level factors were thus critical to binding him to the Hofstadgroup and bringing about his internalization of an extremist ideology. His ultimate arrest on terrorism-related charges was similarly influenced by more than convictions alone. First, there was the shock brought about by the chance viewing of a propaganda video in which a Palestinian victim of Israeli aggression closely resembled his own mother. Second, the murder of Van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri, who had developed into a friend and role model for the interviewee, proved to be an inspirational event that brought about a desire for emulation.

The experiences of Samir Azzouz, another inner-circle Hofstadgroup participant similarly problematize the role of beliefs in bringing about jihadist terrorism. Just prior to his final arrest in October 2005, Azzouz had recorded a videotaped message that appears to refer to an impending attack. Copying jihadist role models such as Osama bin-Laden in speech and attire, with a weapon beside him, Azzouz delivered an emotional message steeped in religious language and references to the Quran. Clearly, extremist convictions were an important element of both his motivation and justification for what appeared to be the planned use of terrorist violence.

Yet, a look at his broader involvement process reveals that those beliefs may have mostly had the latter function; justifying violence that was primarily motivated by outrage over the perceived injustices committed against Muslims in war zones on the one hand, and a deep and personal hatred for the Dutch authorities on the other. [73] Essentially, his political grievances and his personal animosity towards those he saw as having mistreated him and his family, were catalyzed and justified through the jihadist ideology he adopted. The latter may even have had a primarily enabling, rather than motivating, function in his planned acts of terrorist violence.

Had either of these latter two examples been assessed solely through a 'radicalization' based perspective centered on the role of ideas, many of the crucial elements constituting their involvement pathways would have been missed. While few scholars or authoritative interpretations of radicalization would claim that only beliefs matter, the implicit emphasis put on the role of convictions deserves to be critically examined by examples such as the Hofstadgroup case study from which this paper takes its inspiration. The bigger challenge for radicalization-based approaches remains, however, their inability to explain the discrepancy between the many apparent or alleged adherents of a particular extremist worldview, be it secular or religious in nature, and the much smaller number of individuals who actually translate such views into violent behavior. It is here that the concept of fanaticism can make a difference.

### ***Revisiting Fanaticism***[74]

Described as the ‘pinnacle of psychological analyses of the terrorist’ by a leading terrorism scholar, Taylor’s 1991 book *The Fanatic* offers a detailed account of when and how extremist beliefs can lead to the adoption of violent means.[75] Despite this endorsement, citations of the work reveal that its impact has largely been made outside of the boundaries of terrorism research.[76] Although referenced in several publications on terrorism,[77] few authors in this field have engaged with it in-depth[78] and neither has Taylor revisited it in detail in subsequent work.[79] This is unfortunate, given that fanaticism provides a behaviorally-oriented perspective on if and when extremist beliefs can lead to terrorist violence. It is this element of conditionality that sets fanaticism apart from radicalization. The key question that many radicalization interpretations cannot address is why most radicals never become terrorists. Fanaticism’s utility lies in its ability to provide at least the beginnings of an answer.

At the outset, it is important to state that fanaticism should not be treated as a pathological state of mind, nor should fanatics be seen as intrinsically ‘different’ individuals. The fanatic and the ‘normal’ individual essentially occupy different points on the same behavioral continuum.[80] Instead, fanaticism is defined as behavior that displays ‘excessive enthusiasm’ for certain religious or political beliefs.[81] Fanatical convictions can influence behavior because they essentially prescribe a variety of rules that link an individual’s current action to distant outcomes.[82] For instance, religious belief can motivate specific behavior by connecting distant outcomes, such as salvation in an afterlife, to daily behavior such as prayer. For the vast majority of people, religious or political beliefs are not the only influence on their behavior. But for the fanatic, “the influence of ideology is such that it excludes or attenuates other social, political or personal forces that might be expected to control and influence behavior.”[83]

Fanatical behavior encompasses ten qualities. These are, 1) an excessive focusing on issues of concern to the fanatic, 2) a worldview that is solely based on ideological convictions, 3) an insensitivity to others and to ‘normal’ social pressures, 4) a loss of critical judgment in that the fanatic is apt to pursue ends and utilize means that seem to run contrary to his or her personal interests and 5) a surprising tolerance for inconsistency and incompatibility in the beliefs held. People engaged in fanatical behavior are further apt to display 6) great certainty in the appropriateness of the actions taken, 7) a simplified view of the world, 8) high resistance to facts or interpretations that undermine their convictions, 9) disdain for the victims of the fanatic’s behavior and 10) the construction of a social environment that makes it easier to sustain fanatical views.[84]

This operationalization of fanaticism allows researchers and counterterrorism professionals to identify, at least to some extent, individuals who are behaviorally more likely to be strongly influenced by their beliefs. For practitioners, these qualities may offer a useful complement to existing threat assessment procedures; not as a ‘profiling’ tool, but, for instance, as a means for assessing the relative likeliness for participants in an extremist group to act on their beliefs. The ten factors outlined above make clear that fanatical behavior is based on more than mere adherence to radical or extremist beliefs. Particularly interesting in this regard is the reference to the construction of a supportive social environment, as this fits with the finding that the vast majority of terrorist violence is perpetrated by groups.[85] The radical or extremist group appears to provide catalyzing conditions, increasing the likeliness that convictions will influence behavior.

Like any single factor underlying involvement in terrorism, fanaticism alone is insufficient to explain violent

behavior. The likeliness that fanatical convictions can lead to violent behavior is tied to the presence of three contextual factors.[86] The first is millenarianism, or the belief that the world is facing an impending and apocalyptic disaster or change. The very imminence of millenarian beliefs can strengthen their ideological control over individual behavior, as the consequences of the believer's actions are no longer relegated to a distant future. Additionally, some ideologies advocate violent action as a way of hastening the advent of a new world order.[87] The second factor is the totality of ideological control; when there is little to no 'public space' in which the ideology and its alternatives can be freely debated, or where others are likely to challenge the fanatic's views, the ideology's influence over every aspect of its adherents' lives will increase.[88] The third factor is the militancy of the ideological belief itself, in other words the degree to which it provides, or can be construed to provide, motivations or justifications for the use of force.[89]

### *Fanaticism in Practice: Returning to the Hofstadgroup*

By providing a nuanced understanding of how and when fanatical convictions can lead to violence, fanaticism allows the specificity problem inherent in many radicalization-based approaches to be addressed. The following paragraphs will demonstrate this by returning to the Hofstadgroup case study discussed above. First of all, it is striking that Bouyeri, the man who murdered Van Gogh in 2004, scores highest on the ten qualities of fanaticism. Starting in 2003, this individual's life began to revolve virtually exclusively around his Salafi-Jihadist beliefs, which also became the sole schema through which he interpreted the world around him. The fact that Bouyeri claimed full responsibility in court for murdering Van Gogh, and that at an earlier stage he quit his studies and his job, demonstrate an insensitivity to 'normal' social pressures such as the need for education and employment and appear contrary to his own best interests.[90]

Further signs of fanaticism were the gruesome way in which Bouyeri murdered his victim, almost decapitating him as he lay dead or dying on an Amsterdam street, and the killer's statement in court that he would have done the same had family members been the blasphemers. The latter indicates a high degree of certainty in the justness of his actions, whereas the former speaks of a dismissive attitude towards his victims.[91] Finally, by limiting his social circle to like-minded individuals, Van Gogh's assailant construed precisely the type social environment that reinforced and sustained his extremist views.[92] This application of the qualities of fanaticism enables a structured examination of the beliefs that motivated Bouyeri to violence. Yet, many of these qualities were shared, if not to the same degree, by the assailant's inner-circle compatriots. Addressing this disparity more fully requires turning to the arguments about the circumstances under which fanatical beliefs are more likely to lead to violent behavior.

One of these contingencies concerns the militancy of the ideological beliefs. Given that Bouyeri shared an adherence to Salafi-Jihadist views with the Hofstadgroup's inner-circle, this factor fails to offer a satisfactory explanation of why only the assailant acted on those beliefs. A more substantial distinction presents itself with regard to millenarianism. Van Gogh's assailant shared with the wider group the belief that a global war against Islam was taking place, yet it is only in the former's writings that this struggle is given an apocalyptic flavor and presented as the violent apogee of a titanic historical struggle between the forces of good and evil, one that demands immediate action from Islam's 'true believers'.[93] By contrast, in the videotaped threat recorded by the other inner-circle participant discussed above, arguably the most militant expression found within the broader group, millenarian motifs are absent.[94]

The most salient difference between Bouyeri and the other extremists in the Hofstadgroup's inner circle, is tied to the notion of the totality of ideological control. Essentially, the less someone is exposed to contrarian points of view, the more likely it is that his or her fanaticism will come to exert behavioral influence.[95] Most Hofstadgroup participants, even those within its militant core, retained at least some connections to the world outside the group through old friends, school, work or because they still lived with their parents. By contrast, Bouyeri's socialization into Salafi-Jihadism had gone hand-in-hand with his withdrawal from society; he lived alone since 2000, quit his part-time job and his studies following the death of his mother in December 2001, and stopped his volunteer work for an Amsterdam community center in July 2003.[96] As he cut off contacts with his old friends, his social circle became limited to fellow Hofstadgroup participants. [97] Bouyeri was "always at home reading and translating." [98] This social setting reinforced and spurred his militancy, while his isolation from non-radical social circles allowed his burgeoning extremism to grow unchecked by counterarguments or simple exposure to different points of views. Within these self-imposed confines, Bouyeri's violent convictions could become all-encompassing and ever-present, exerting influence on his behavior to a degree not found among his compatriots. In short, Van Gogh's killer acted on his beliefs while his fellow extremists in the Hofstadgroup did not, because he was the most fanatical of them, because his views had a notable apocalyptic edge and, most saliently, because they were adopted and nurtured in a social setting characterized by a lack of countervailing opinions not experienced to the same degree by his compatriots.

## **Conclusion**

Since radicalization made its entry into the debate on terrorism in the early 2000s, numerous scholars have developed the concept beyond the shortcomings of its early conceptualizations. Yet in much of the broader literature on terrorism, and particularly among government agencies tasked with preventing and responding to terrorism, radicalization is still too often perceived of as a process in which the adoption of radical beliefs precedes and leads to participation in terrorist violence. Not only are radicalism, extremism and terrorism distinct concepts that are not causally linked to one another, but empirical research has demonstrated that the majority of radical individuals never turn their convictions into violent acts and that even actual terrorists are not necessarily or primarily motivated by their extremist beliefs.

Ideology is without a doubt a key variable to explain involvement in terrorism. Yet as demonstrated by the case study of the Dutch homegrown jihadist 'Hofstadgroup', from which this article drew its inspiration, motives for terrorism are diverse and frequently multicausal, extending beyond the motivating or justifying influence of convictions alone. By raising beliefs as the key element to understanding terrorism, what we might call 'mainstream' radicalization not only incorrectly inflates beliefs with behavior, but overstates the explanatory potential of this variable while leaving others underemphasized.[99] One of the goals of this study was to highlight these issues and their ongoing influence. The authors also wanted to suggest a way to better understand the potential for beliefs to influence violent behavior.

To this end, the second part of the article revisited the concept of 'fanaticism' and used the Hofstadgroup case study to illustrate its ability to inform thinking on the potential for extremist beliefs to inspire terrorist violence. The benefits of fanaticism as a concept, lie in its ability to offer a way for gauging if and when extremist views are likely to inspire violent behavior. It overcomes radicalization's inability to explain why only some radicals



will act on their beliefs by identifying ten qualities of fanaticism as a way of assessing the *degree* to which someone is influenced by their beliefs. Furthermore, it highlights three contextual factors that, when present, will increase the likeliness of fanatical beliefs inspiring violent behavior. This attention to contingent factors in particular recommends fanaticism as an alternative to radicalization for understanding the role of extremist beliefs in bringing about involvement in terrorist violence.

Fanaticism is a practical addition to radicalization-based thinking as far as the role of convictions in inspiring violence is concerned. It is both suited to retrospective analysis of the type academics are likely to conduct and can also be of utility in the context of threat assessment work as a tool to gauge both the degree of fanaticism and the likeliness that a group or particular individuals within that group will turn violence because of it. Police and intelligence agencies are increasingly expected to prevent terrorist attacks from occurring. To do so, they need to carry out the difficult work of allocating limited resources to particular groups or individuals based on their perceived potential for future engagement in violence. As most radicals never become involved in violence, merely looking at indicators of ideological radicalization is a poor way to go about this. Because it provides concrete means for assessing if a certain individual is likely to act on those beliefs, fanaticism can be a particularly useful concept for those working to prevent involvement in terrorism.

A further practical benefit of fanaticism as a concept, is that it can help shift democratic states' counterterrorism policy and practice away from a focus on ideas toward the policing of behavior. The emphasis that 'radicalization' places on the role of ideas as a precursor to potential involvement in terrorist violence, means that efforts to detect and prevent this phenomenon have similarly tended to look at expressions of adherence to radical and extremist beliefs. Beyond questions of efficacy, the legal protections placed on free speech and beliefs in democratic societies make this a controversial practice. Fanaticism stresses *behavioral* indicators that can be used to provide an, albeit rudimentary, assessment of the degree to which someone's actions are influenced by extremist convictions. This makes it a substantively different concept than radicalization, one that can perhaps be acted upon to detect and prevent involvement in terrorism based upon behavioral indicators rather than signs of adherence to radical or extremist beliefs alone.

Our advocacy of the concept of fanaticism is not intended as a replacement for radicalization-based thinking as a whole or an attempt at rebranding it, but as an addition to the debate about how and why participation in terrorist groups and terrorist violence can occur. Revisiting fanaticism will hopefully contribute to the larger discussion about how to attain a more accurate understanding of the role that radical and extremist convictions can play in these processes.

### ***Acknowledgements***

We are grateful for the reviewers' insightful feedback on earlier versions of this article. The first author also thanks Peter van Kuijk for his encouragement to write this piece.

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