Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut

by Donald Holbrook and John Horgan

Abstract

An enduring bugbear in the study of terrorism is conceptualizing the role ideology plays for individuals involved in such activities. Explanations range from presenting ideology as a key determinant to those who argue that it is often barely relevant at all. In this article we seek to reconcile competing notions of ideology in the emergence of terrorism by making the case for a non-binary conceptualization of ideology. Our approach here emphasizes interpretations of social identity over depictions of the doctrinal. We divide key concerns about ideology in individual processes to terrorism into three related arguments: 'cognition', 'causation' and 'exposure' and explore how these can be reconciled. This more nuanced conceptual understanding of ideology in processes leading to terrorism, we suggest, will aid our analysis of terrorism and the way in which we may approach ideological variables in its context.

Keywords: terrorism, ideology, cognition, belief, violence.

Introduction

The question 'what causes terrorism?' is perhaps both the most frequent and inevitable response to violent extremist events today. Though the search for satisfactory answers continues to elude even the most dedicated researchers, one common assumption centers around the role of ideology. That is to say, despite not necessarily knowing much about the precise mechanisms involved, we might safely assume that when it comes to explaining terrorism (as opposed to other kinds of illicit violent activities), that ideology plays at least *some* role in the development of violent extremist activity. However, there is no consensus in discussions about terrorism of what the role of ideology in these processes may look like. This article seeks to address that divergence.

On one end of the spectrum, depictions of terrorism as manifestations of cohesive 'ideologies' are a constant theme in the reactions of political leaders to such events, and these are amplified in the post-event dissections of the news media and other commentators.[1] Terrorists are thus simply seen as acting on behalf of some hostile 'ideology' as they carry out acts of violence. Counterterrorism efforts, in turn, become framed in explicitly ideological terms. A former British prime minister, for instance, declared that combating terrorism involved a "generational […] battle against a poisonous ideology".[2] Such depictions seem to limit explanations for the causes of terrorism to the presence of ideology, to which many are exposed, whilst terrorism remains a rare outcome of a very complex set of processes.[3]

On the other end of the spectrum, there exists a strong body of scholarship—and one that has grown over the years—illustrating that consumption of, or commitment to, an ideology that endorses violence is not a strong predictor of involvement in terrorism. These scholars often see the role of ideology in the emergence of terrorism at an individual level as minimal or even absent.[4] Yet, while adoption of an ideology does not in itself lead people to become involved in terrorism, its role in these processes (and where and when precisely it becomes relevant for the individual) remains unclear, despite the attention the topic has received.[5]

The core dilemma is this: terrorism is defined as a form of political violence where existing norms of governing society are challenged. Ideas and beliefs are thus inherent, in some way, in its definition.[6] Remove this ideational ingredient and we are left with acts of violence whose intended projection is either more utilitarian or personal than symbolic, irrespective of the factors that may have led to them in the first place.[7] "A terrorist without a cause (at least in his own mind)", Kellen suggested, "is not a terrorist". [8] To be classified as terrorism, the Department of Homeland Security recently observed, there has to be a "discernable political, ideological, or religious motivation".[9]

Why is all this important? We suggest that these arguments are not merely abstract or theoretical. The identification of politically or ideologically symbolic and communicative elements in the planning and execution of violence determines whether such acts *per se* are treated as terrorism, with concomitant implications for the way in which such cases might be investigated, by which branch of government, with what investigative powers and whether prosecutors would pursue them as violation of terrorism legislation. Consequently, this has significant implications for the individuals involved.[10] Reaching a 'terroristic' threshold by virtue of politically symbolic attributes, in the eyes of external observers, therefore, has very real consequences.

Our central argument is that notions of ideology in the emergence of terrorism can be clarified and conflicting depictions of its role and agency in these processes can be reconciled if we arrive at a non-binary conceptualization of ideology that emphasizes interpretations of social identity over depictions of the doctrinal.[11] Ideology is thus something that is fluid, not rigid, and not something that either "does or does not" impact individuals, depending on their substantive engagement with its content. Ideology is not something they either possess or do not possess and its impact can best be understood by virtue of the way in which the perception of their environment is shaped. This perception, in turn, can affect other processes that intertwine in individual trajectories towards violence. We suggest this conceptual understanding will aid the analysis of terrorism and the way in which ideology matters in this context.

To be clear, we are concerned here with the function of ideology in the emergence of terrorism and the way in which we can arrive at an understanding that incorporates different perspectives regarding the role ideology plays for the individual terrorist. We are not concerned with the study of ideology as an isolated phenomenon per se, the studies of which, as Leader Maynard observed, have produced varied understandings of the term.[12]

The Problem with Ideology and Terrorism

Let us begin by setting out the reason ideological explanations of involvement in terrorism are problematic. As noted, the correlation between ideology and terrorism is often seen to be weak. We divide this case against ideology's significance in the emergence of terrorism into three related arguments: cognition, causation, and exposure.

In this section we look at these three positions in more detail. We then explore ways in which the questions they raise can be addressed by emphasizing an understanding of ideology in the emergence of terrorism that underscores its social dimensions. When viewed as a collective map to make sense of the world, we argue, ideology is relevant throughout these processes. With this understanding in mind, we revisit the *cognition, causation* and *exposure* arguments in the second half of this article and conclude that ideology can serve a variety of different purposes for those becoming involved in terrorism and that the activities it informs go beyond participation in violence per se.

   A. *Cognition*

Many terrorists presented as religious extremists have had no history of religious engagement or even practice. Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who murdered 86 people during the 2016 Bastille Day celebrations in Nice, reportedly lived a life "far from religion" up until the last few days before the attack, where he started searching for Islamist extremist content online, including *nasheeds*—Islamic vocal songs—endorsing violence.[13] The story often seems similar with single issue terrorists and far-right extremists, especially lone actors. Darren Osbourne, who launched a vehicle attack against Muslims in north London in June 2017, was described during his sentencing as being driven by an "ideology of hate towards Muslims". Yet he had reportedly spent only four weeks reading far-right material online, with his interest initially triggered by a BBC documentary about sexual abuse of young girls by British-Pakistani Muslim men in the UK.[14] This begs the question, if individuals are so ignorant of the tenets of the belief system that was meant

to have driven them, or to which their actions have been attributed, how can we describe their actions as ideologically motivated? And if they were not ideologically motivated, how can these individuals be described as terrorists?

Walter Laqueur has observed that "in every generation it was not the people most deeply convinced of the righteousness of their cause who were the activists, but the most aggressive and militant".[15] Randy Borum echoed these findings, arguing that "some [terrorists] have only a cursory knowledge of, or commitment to, the radical ideology".[16] Others have described how terrorists often "develop an instrumentalized cut-and-paste interpretation of a given ideology in order to justify their recourse to violence".[17] Andrew Silke, in turn, pointed out: "at the early stages those that become involved in terrorism have a very limited understanding of the ideology—they are not scholars".[18] Accounts of some travelers to Islamist extremist organizations fighting in the civil war in Syria would appear to confirm these observations. Some seemed to have virtually no expertise of their purported calling. There were accounts of travelers who had ordered copies of "The Koran for Dummies" and "Islam for Dummies" from the online retailer Amazon prior to their departure, which seems indicative of their utter lack of any prior 'ideological' involvement or preparedness. [19]

B. *Causation*

The causation argument is slightly different from the cognition argument, that posits that individuals do not understand the ideology that's supposed to inspire them. This argument instead suggests that ideological variables are simply not that important or central to factors leading someone to becoming involved in terrorism, when other factors are considered.[20]

Randy Borum and Robert Fein, for instance, argued that, "even those who take up arms to fight under the banner of a global 'cause' or ideology may not be ideologically driven".[21] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko argued that "there are many paths to radicalization that do not involve ideology. Some join a radical group for thrills and status, some for love, some for connection and comradeship. Personal and group grievances can move individuals toward violence, with ideology serving only to rationalize the violence".[22] Marc Sageman, meanwhile, suggested that friendship networks were a stronger precursor to terrorist involvement than ideological engagement.[23] Researchers studying terrorism in Northern Ireland found that members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army were driven more by "the political situation and social juncture at the time rather than ideology".[24] Silke, in turn, argued that individuals get drawn to terrorism because of "identity issues" rather than ideology: "[t]he evidence isn't there to say ideology is the prime reason why people are becoming terrorists".[25] Glazzard, meanwhile, argued that ideological explanations for involvement in terrorism were "at best a gross over-simplification" that left out factors "from socio-economic grievances to the lure of adventure to the primary human need for survival, […] identification with a group, socialization, and the effect of civil conflicts" that were "well-evidenced explanations for behavioral change".[26] Ideology, in short, is seen to be peripheral or absent in many trajectories towards terrorism.

C. *Exposure*

The exposure argument is based on an understanding that consumption of ideological content endorsing terrorism, even extremist content disseminated by the terrorist organizations themselves, is common and much more common than acts or attempted acts of physical involvement in terrorist activities. "Many people are exposed to the impact of culture or political ideas, however, only a few select terrorism", Martha Crenshaw wrote in 1988, [27] while Borum noted that most people "who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism".[28] Practitioners have also pointed out that identification of individuals engaging with extremist ideological content endorsing terrorism is an insufficient indicator that they are about to participate in acts of terrorism simply since such activities, online especially, are so common. Investigations and surveillance would rarely be employed based simply on such patterns of viewing, requiring instead much more concrete indicators that individuals were preparing to mobilize to physical action.[29] Furthermore, we also have evidence suggesting that engagement with extremist ideological discourses and the social movements that

sustain them may even constitute a protective factor in relation to risk of involvement in terrorism if such activities 'satisfy' any need to participate—or to be seen to participate—in this milieu.[30] Ideology-based notions of risk of involvement in terrorism, in short, would generate a large volume of false positives.

Despite these observations, we are still left with the fact that ideology, in the form of some sort of engagement with political or religious beliefs and ideas, typically defines acts of violence as terrorism and separates them from other forms of violent crime. Investigations into terrorist plots have also consistently shown that "radical and extremist media" have been downloaded, shared and streamed in virtually all of them.[31] Terrorists have also authored their own ideological material and used attacks as platforms to publicize written manifestos, video announcements or other forms of communication. They are aware of the symbolism of their actions and the political consequences these will have.

The challenge is thus to develop a conceptualization of ideology for those involved in terrorism that accounts for the cognition, causation and exposure arguments as set out above. This, it should be noted, is distinct from developing more static definitions for 'terrorism ideology' which seem more specifically designed to capture ideational output from terrorist organizations or their proponents, irrespective of how that body of content may be acted upon or shape the activities of others in more indefinite ways.[32] To improve our understanding of ideology in the context of terrorism, however, we must understand both its composition and function.

Addressing the Problem

Ideologies have been described as systems of belief with collective properties and purpose. "An ideology", J. Leader-Maynard observed, "is a distinctive system of normative, semantic, and/or reputedly factual ideas, typically shared by members of groups or societies, which underpins their understanding of their political world and shapes their political behaviour".[33] The collective—social—components of ideology are central properties that are highlighted across the academic disciplines that have developed our understanding of the term. For Michael Freeden, the political theorist, ideologies constituted "imaginative maps [that are] collectively produced and collectively consumed in unpredictable ways".[34] J. Wilson, a sociologist, similarly defined ideologies as cognitive maps of shared values and expectations delineating standards and expectations, thus serving both as a "clue to understanding and as a guide to action".[35] The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, meanwhile, described ideologies as "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience".[36] How can these communal maps of our social world be 'used' to encourage collective violence?

To interrogate such notions of agency we need to explore the ways in which collective ideas unfold in social settings, in order to encourage and encase resistance against—or protection of—established norms and power structures.

Social-psychological models of collective action emphasize three antecedents of such resistance: (a) anger at perceived injustice, (b) social identification, and (c) beliefs about group efficacy.[37] Collective action is thus more likely when people have "shared interests, feel relatively deprived, are angry, believe they can make a difference, and strongly identify with relevant social groups".[38] Such processes, J.T. Jost et al. argue, are inherently ideological, since they entail preferences concerning the prevailing social system (whether in support or opposition to the status quo) that are expressed in political ways.[39]

Here we need to pause and elaborate what we mean by 'collective' and 'action'. Terrorism, after all, is often perpetrated by individuals who seem socially isolated and operate alone.[40] Yet their actions are designed to speak for or to a particular community, real or imagined, that share grievances, aspirations and envisaged ways in which to achieve them.

The Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, for instance, had no known associates and lived in complete isolation in a remote cabin without electricity or even running water as he planned and executed his prolonged letter-

bomb campaign. Through his violence he successfully coerced national newspapers to publish his political manifesto, *Industrial Society and its Future*. In it he wrote on behalf of an imagined collective, not as an individual, and called for mass mobilization in the interest of what he saw as a common cause.[41]

'Action', meanwhile, committed on behalf of a collective—real or imagined—can have different manifestations where participation in violence is only one possible outcome. Different forms of action might be supportive or conducive to terrorism, without involving direct participation in violence, including authoring or distributing manifestos, fundraising or even through public expressions of support for violence. Such behaviors constitute actions in their own right that often, depending on the legal context, carry significant risk for the perpetrator. Proponents of terrorist violence, in turn, have recognized that support for their cause can involve a variety of different roles through which wider mobilization of support can be achieved.[42] Such roles are not mutually exclusive. Kaczynski, in the example above, for instance, was both a perpetrator of political violence (and a talented bomb-maker) as well as a producer of explicit political content which the violence was meant to publicize. Violence, in short, is not the only form of action that is relevant to terrorism. We revisit this point in the final section of this article.

This understanding of terrorism involving diverse collective action becomes key to unlocking the role of ideology in these processes. If we look at the definitions above, a common thread that runs through them all is a sense of shared understanding within a given population. Individuals, in turn, can aid or support— however loosely—their kin in different ways that conform to the shared notions of community, threat or reward that the ideology conveys.

Ideology should thus be approached as a more fluid concept than some existing models on terrorism and its emergence assume. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko's references to ideological variables in this context, for instance, through notions of 'possessing' "jihadist" or "radical" ideas and opinions, are more static than the literature on ideologies and their social underpinnings would suggest.[43] They also appear to assume that any ideological components are limited to radical or extremist interpretations that concentrate on condoning the use of violence. The reality may be more complex where ideology serves a much more holistic purpose: tying into all aspects of life, not just violence. Research into seized media from UK terrorism investigations, for example, found that extremist ideological content formed only a small component of a more comprehensive milieu, where even the extremist subset was composed of multifaceted types of discourse, ranging from abstract debates about violence to detailed prescriptions about targeting.[44] This might question the utility of bespoke definitions of 'terrorism ideology' as a body of ideas that explicitly call for the use of terrorist violence.[45] Such conceptualizations neither reflect the ideological output from groups such as ISIS, that mix extreme and non-extreme motifs in its media repertoire, or the range of ideological content with which terrorists engage.

Grievance – Blame – Response

M. Dugas and Arie Kruglanski's conceptualization of 'terrorism-justifying ideologies' is more helpful. They based their definition on three key components: a collection of grievances, the identification of a culprit responsible for grievances, and arguments favoring terrorist acts for the community and individual. Echoing the definitions cited above, ideology, the authors argued, was thus "inextricably social", consisting of a shared reality adopted by members of a collectivity and spread via the formation of social bonds.[46]

Dugas and Kruglanski's approach reflects early contributions from sociology on the key components of ideology, as well as the literature on ways in which social movements seek to mobilize constituents, which helps us understand their agency in relation to terrorism.

In the 1970s, the sociologist John Wilson divided the *structures* of ideology into three related fields: diagnosis, prognosis and a rationale for action. Diagnosis introduced the notion of a common cause: the question was no longer, "why should this happen to me", but "why should *a thing like this* happen to *people like me.*"

Prognosis elaborated a collective response in fulfillment of the common cause, while a distinct rationale for action identified those responsible for change.[47]

Ideology can thus acquire agency through political entrepreneurs communicating a vision of the world seeking to mobilize a given constituency to resist the status quo. Such a paradigm does not assume that mobilization of support is inevitable but helps us ask questions about whether the mobilizing message might resonate, concentrating on the interplay between a person's circumstances and the collective memory and identity of their social surroundings.[48]

Wilson's conceptualization of ideological structures, in turn, has informed other related and corresponding models, in particular David Snow and R. Benford's 'collective action frames', whereby social movement organizations developed 'diagnostic', 'prognostic' and 'motivational' interpretive structures—or frames—in order to mobilize constituencies [49]. The model has since been applied in numerous studies of terrorism and political violence [50] and these three components—problem diagnosis, prognosis, and response—feature in conceptual explanations about individual pathways leading to terrorism.[51]

Ideology as a Social Fabric

Concentrating on social dimensions of ideology that emphasize perceptions of collective grievance, common alternatives and a united response, therefore, enhances the utility of the term in its application to terrorism as socio-political violence and harmonizes its usage with other sources of explanation.[52] As noted, this approach is common in discussions of terrorist groups, leaderships or movements, but underutilized when it comes to broader questions about the function of ideology for the individual.

Ideology gains significance not just in the substance of any meaning conveyed but also in its modes of transmission and the linkages these exchanges establish.[53] Ideology is integral to, not separate from, the relational mechanisms involved in radicalization pathways and its processes of social learning, collective memory and other social constructs.[54] It imbues its components, such as status, belonging and reward, with significance which can only be understood in that ideological context: defining allegiances and roles, brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and the pull of immaterial rewards such as salvation through martyrdom.

Rather than resting uncomfortably alongside these processes as static doctrinal pillars impenetrable to all but dedicated 'ideologues', the role of ideology can best be explained through highlighting its social components, the collective maps and shared perspectives that help us make sense of the world and define who is or is not part of our community.

Indeed, such divisions—of community and non-community—are on open display by many who participate in, or endorse, terrorist violence and are legitimized with reference to ideology.[55] On the Islamist extremist side, several iterations of the proscribed Al-Muhajiroun group assumed names—'The Strangers', the 'Saved Sect'—which they based on their interpretation of scripture; these emphasized their separation from wider society, with references to the group's core ideological principles.[56] Research on far-right extremism, meanwhile, has emphasized the countercultural properties of its members. James Mason, the prominent American neo-Nazi, wrote in his collection of essays called 'Siege', that it was imperative for activists to be "alienated" from the "System".[57]

These social enclaves are sometimes referred to as subcultures [58], where new moral frameworks are constructed [59] where even lethal violence against noncombatants can be presented as necessary and virtuous.[60] In one sense, ideology can thus 'normalize' what previously would have constituted deviance. [61] Interaction within the group offers social validation of beliefs that may be abhorrent to those who are outside it.[62]

It is through this understanding of the emergence of social collective and socially constructed sources of meaning that we begin to appreciate a more multifaceted role that ideologies can play in processes leading

toward terrorism. Ideologies provide a shared sense of belonging and stories that define that community, its heritage and common values. One does not need to 'qualify' with any level of 'expertise' or knowledge in discourses associated with particular ideologies to be affected by them, or for them, to impact on our frames of reference. As Yongman notes, "the term ideological […] should not be treated as a substitute for intellectual".[63]

A *nasheed* celebrating the rewards of the martyrs once they ascend to the highest stages of heaven may evoke a powerful emotional response, irrespective of the recipient's cognitive capacity to dissect any theological underpinnings that might be associated with it. Indeed, we know that they are popular among individuals who do not even understand the lyrics, simply because they strike an emotional cord or reflect 'membership' of a social collective deemed desirable.[64] And one does not merely 'possess' certain ideas without having gone through a process where these ideas were acquired which also serves to shape our perspective. Jost et al. observe how people's emotional interaction with their social system is key to understanding their collective action. "Injustice can elicit negative system-level emotions (e.g., moral outrage), but people also share positive system-level emotions such as pride, satisfaction, gratitude, and joy".[65]

In this sense, ideology is embedded throughout journeys towards terrorism, through the demarcation of a social collective whose interests are under threat. It is a looking glass through which to see the world, both its positive and negative aspects.[66] Grievances may be personal but through terrorism they are expressed through assumed prosocial means. The "modes of transmission"[67] that sustain this collective—whether speeches, stories, manifestos or other cultural produce[68]—are varied and can be as simple as the *nasheeds* that Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel began listening to in the days before his attack, depending on how they are presented and received.[69]

Cognition, Causation, Exposure Revisited

Where does this leave us in relation to the three arguments questioning the role of ideology in the context of terrorism? Let us take each one in turn.

A. *Cognition*

It seems beyond any doubt that terrorists or attempted terrorists and their supporters can be utterly ignorant of any technical aspects of the ideological tenets with which they may have identified, whether this is in the form of strategic thought or theological exegesis, geopolitical discourse or philosophical doctrine. Yet they can still develop emotional ties to a community through something as simple as a *nasheed*, a persuasive video or a friendly web forum. The modes of transmission that convey ideology are as varied in their composition as their impact on individuals is complex. As Lorne Dawson has observed, there is an important distinction between acquiring or engaging with the substance of scripture or theology of a religion on the one hand and *religiosity*, which refers to a strong religious feeling or belief, on the other:

> Faulty theology is not a reliable indicator of degree of religiosity or the primacy of religion in someone's motivations, as social psychologists should know. But many analysts fall prey to this illogical inference, arguing that the discrepancies between how jihadists, on the one hand, and how mainstream Muslims and scholars of Islam on the other hand, interpret the basic elements of the al-Qaeda ideology somehow refutes the sincerity of the religious commitments of the jihadists.[70]

It is equally plausible to assume that young, white and disenfranchised men and women may identify with concepts such as the 'great replacement' narrative, that posits that mass immigration and Islam pose an existential threat to 'ethnonationalist' European cultures, and project their own fears and grievances onto them, without having scrutinized, digested or even understood Anders Breivik's 1,500-page manifesto from cover to cover, or the philosophical works of Guillaume Faye, Jean-Yves Camus, Bat Ye'or or their contemporaries.[71].

B. *Causation*

It again seems irrefutable that consumption of ideology alone, including extremist ideology, does not produce a terrorist. These processes are immensely complex and specific to individuals, while studies that have sought to identify patterns between them invariably identify nonideological variables. Yet, ideology, properly understood, does not sit opposite or isolated from these variables but rather imbues them with particular meanings in a given context.

As Hall observed:

> Nowadays the term ideology includes the whole range of concepts, ideas and images which provide the frameworks of interpretation and meaning for social and political thought in society, whether they exist at the high, systematic, philosophical level or at the level of casual, everyday, contradictory, common-sense explanation […] *no* ideology is ever wholly logical or consistent.[72]

Similarly, for David Snow, ideologies exist on a continuum from "a tightly connected set of values and beliefs at one end to a loosely coupled set of values and beliefs at the other end".[73] Ideology should thus not be limited to doctrine, doctrinal authorities or engagement, as is sometimes the case in analyses of terrorism, since this does not reflect common scholarly understanding of the topic. Ideology frames and adds significance to the factors (positive and negative, from the individual's perspective) that are frequently cited in relation to involvement in terrorism, including notions of kin, belonging, emotional attachment and a sense of shared heritage and grievance—elements that are articulated and contextualized with some reference to common beliefs. Indeed, these elements are central in propaganda output by terrorist groups seeking to appeal to a broader support base or to solidify their existing membership. In a 'self-interview' released to the public in 1974, for example, the Italian Red Brigades presented themselves as a militant vanguard of the entire "working class movement" tasked with "uniting the people, mobilizing and arming them" in order to establish a new "communist society" that would end the exploitation of the masses.[74] Notions of identity, camaraderie, altruism, status and reward, therefore, do not exist on one side of a conceptual dichotomy but are instead embedded within a broader ideological context from which they derive meaning.

C. *Exposure*

What about the exposure argument? Terrorist organizations usually have sizable propaganda wings that disseminate vast amounts of media content, distributed online. Added to this is material from their supporters, as well as from independent or nonaligned ideologues, and, given the fact that—as noted above—that terrorists' interests are diverse, material from political or religious radicals may appeal and be relevant. The result is that the volume of ideological material available 'out there' is immense and easy to find. Scores may develop an interest in such material or stumble upon it without ever seeking to become involved in terrorism more directly through material or immaterial support. Yet one can hold views without being impressed by a need to act on them since other priorities might prevail, at a given point in the course of one's life. The substantial sacrifices needed to become involved in terrorism usually rarely make terrorism an attractive or realistic option for most young people. Mobilization, as is now thoroughly established, is not the same as developing affinity for extreme ideas. Even if there is a desire to become physically or even passively involved in terrorism, there are constrains to be overcome, and much may depend on opportunities that arise, or the unavailability or cessation of potential or existing options. Some doors close, others may open.

Yet at the same time, participation in violence only forms one small, albeit important, part in a repertoire of roles and actions relevant to the emergence of terrorism. Individuals may well see themselves as part of a community that legitimizes or facilitates such violence, thus agreeing with the ideology that underpins it, without seeking or intending to seek direct participation in it. Just as we need more fluid understanding of ideology in the context of terrorism and its emergence, therefore, so too do we need to understand the diversity of action repertoires conducive to such action.

Let us, in conclusion, briefly examine this aspect more closely.

"Walking the Walk" vs. "Talking the Talk"

Ideology, as a collective map to view and make sense of the world, is relevant throughout processes leading to terrorism. These processes are a complex interplay of factors. For some, ideological components may be especially salient, while for others they may add meaning in subtler ways. The visibility and importance of these components may also differ at various points in an individual's trajectory towards violence or supportive action and be triggered or affected by different life events. As Yongman notes, "we should not expect all actors within a movement to have an equal interest in articulating and debating positions on problematic aspects of social and political topics, even if they share the underlying beliefs".[75]

Some may be more willing or able to engage in such debates than others, and those who are, are not necessarily those who are most likely to participate in violence.[76] But the sharing of ideas that convey an understanding of collective grievance, aspiration and a sense of community is relevant to terrorism in a variety of often interweaving ways. Perhaps the most obvious concerns ways in which ideological output legitimizes certain targets or methods employed through terrorist violence. But the role of ideological products can be subtler too. Morten Storm, a jihadist-turned-spy, described how books, lectures, videos "and conversations late into the night" guided him on his path towards militancy, whereby media conveying a particular ideological worldview served as a way to solidify bonds among new friends, as well as setting out more political or religious agenda or arguments.[77]

In 2018 'Fascist Forge', a prominent neo-Nazi web forum associated with a range of extreme right militancy, [78] posted a multipart written exam on its website which new users would have to complete before being granted full membership. The exam contained 26 questions testing new members' knowledge of the movement's key literature and ethos. Ideology was thus being tested very explicitly and used as a form of vetting. But the process was also designed to engender a sense of community among the members who qualified. A curator of the website commented that the exam was an "effort to create and maintain a high quality Fascist community".[79]

Whilst ideology can thus serve a variety of different purposes for those becoming involved in terrorism, the activities it informs go beyond participation in violence per se. Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American preacher who joined Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as its chief ideologue, conceived of 44 ways in which individuals could support the jihad, none of which explicitly involved carrying out acts of terrorism. [80] These ways included financial and logistical support, as well as generating their own media content to encourage yet more support for a common cause.

Conclusion

Research on violent extremism is perhaps enjoying its long-overdue golden age, with more researchers, better data, and greater respect for strong theory and rigorous methods than ever before. Despite great progress, the relationship between ideology and violence remains poorly understood. Individual pathways towards terrorism are immensely varied and complex and some, perhaps most, who go down those paths find ways in which to support violent outcomes while avoiding direct involvement in its execution. Such actions are celebrated and embraced at all levels of terrorist organizations, from group leaders and strategists to grassroot supporters. Causes, processes and conclusions are diverse. There is much more to be done regarding the exploration of how, where and when ideology matters for our understanding of violent extremism. We conclude by asserting that ideology is not merely one element that sits aside these pathways that some encounter and others do not. Rather, ideology is fundamentally part of the environment, affecting all who participate and their perceptions of what they encounter, in different ways and to differing degrees.

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Notes

[1] E.g. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Closing of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism", The White House Office of the Press Secretary (February 18, 2015); URL: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/remarks-president-closing-summit-countering-violent-extremism. Accessed May 2016, and as reflected in policy: The White House. 2011. "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," June 28, 2011, p. 10; URL: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf, accessed May 2016; Her Majesty's Government, "Prevent Strategy Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty", June, 2011; URL: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf. Accessed November 2015; Council of the European Union, "The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy", November 30, 2005; URL: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=URISERV:l33275&from=EN. Accessed December 2015; Security Council (UNSCR 2354 (2017)), as well as contribute to the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288), particularly its pillars I (prevent incitement to commit a terrorist act).

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[6] These factors are central to definitions of terrorism, though we recognise of course that there is no universal consensus regarding the precise meaning of the term. Richards, A. (2015) *Conceptualising Terrorism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press: p. 134; Schmid, A. P. (2011) "The Definition of Terrorism", *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Studies*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.86-87; Crenshaw, M. (2011) "The Causes of Terrorism", originally published in 1981. Republished as chapter in *Explaining* Terrorism: p. 35; Crenshaw Hutchinson, M. (1972) "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 16 No. 3, 1972, pp. 383-396; Hoffman, B. (2006) *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press); Schmid, A.P. (2013) "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review"; in: *ICCT Research*

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[10] The 2001 USA PATRIOT act defined domestic terrorism as acts intended to "intimidate or coerce the civilian population; […] influence the policy of a government" or affect its conduct; United States Congress, 'Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Interrupt and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001'; URL: https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ56/pdf/PLAW-107publ56.pdf (Accessed October, 2018). The UK Terrorism Act 2000 defined terrorism as acts where "the use or threat is designed to influence the government […] or to intimidate the public, and […] the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause." UK Parliament, 'Terrorism Act 2000'; URL: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/1 (Accessed October, 2018).

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[56] 'Al-Muhajiroun' itself refers to the small number of emigrants, the true and dedicated believers, who followed the Prophet Mohammed to Medina in 622 CE. Other names include 'Al-Ghuraba', the strangers, and 'The Saved Sect', referring to a prophecy that the group of true Muslims at the day of judgement will be as small as the first community of Muslims, with the rest being revealed as false pretenders and transgressors. See e.g. Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*, (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

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