Chapter 5
In ISIS We Trust:
Why Does Radicalization Still Matter?

Iskren Ivanov
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9967-6251
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

Tatyana Dronzina
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5794-3390
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how the process of radicalization impacts the perceptions of individuals who adopted extremist beliefs to use political violence. The chapter seeks to determine if cognitive or religious imperatives occupy a central place in the motivation of individuals who become terrorists. The chapter theorizes these issues in the context of a field study that includes conducting in-person interviews with former foreign fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, indicating that their motivation to exercise violence has been a product of premeditated, rational choice that combines political with religious motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Some scholars of terrorism and security studies believe that radicalization is obsolete. Their judgments stem from the assumption that, although non-traditional security challenges have been relevant to the post-September 11 decade, they have been replaced by geopolitical shifts, traditional security threats, or philosophical understandings of how terrorism operates. To put it more generally, every time

since September 11, 2001, when terrorist attacks cease due to a temporary victory over an extremist organization, certain explanations in critical terrorism studies purport to proclaim that radicalization, in its religious part, is arguable and problematic (Jackson, 2007; Francis, 2016; Duyvesteyn, 2004). Terrorism, however, has not transformed its inspiring force, whereas violence remains, in most cases, an independent variable and a substitute for one's perceptions of others. The nature of violence did not change either despite the decline of ISIS, they were instead reinvented and reapplied by Hamas in its attack against Israel. Furthermore, terrorism was not altered by de-radicalization, which some believe to be essential to deter non-traditional security threats, while at the same time, recent studies indicate that radicalization cannot be prevented by merely stopping radicalized individuals from entering a country (Pietrzak, 2019, p. 53). Therefore, a logical dilemma emerges from the actions of ISIS and Hamas: if the conditions and the determinants that most theories have challenged radicalization as a process in its religious context, what aspects of those explanations still apply to terrorism studies?

Profiling radicalized individuals has been an enduring task of scholars in terrorism studies, with a heated argument being discussed about how a person's perceptions could radicalize to the extent of exercising violence. Despite their differences in tracking the patterns of radicalized individuals, most major theoretical approaches seeking to decipher the puzzle of this process share the consensus that principal agents of violence are motivated to employ violent means to achieve political goals (Dossje et al., 2016, p. 79). Radicalization, thus, consists of three clusters that constitute the theoretical efforts of security experts to coin a unified methodology for terrorism profiling. One is the existing relationship between terrorism and religion, within which radicalized practitioners are motivated generally or partially by religious imperatives, regarded as sacred duties (Hoffman, 2006, p. 83). The other concerns the process of resocialization, through which a person's system of social values, beliefs, and norms are reshaped through an intense social process (Orsini, 2023, p. 68). The final cluster stems from the assumption that although radicalization does not necessarily lead to terrorism, it accepts violence as an ultimate cause (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2020, p. 4).

The purpose of this article is to track the process of radicalization on a micro level and see how it reshapes the perceptions of individuals who fought for terrorist groups. By exploring the existing profiles of former foreign fighters, the study purports to offer a structural approach to studying a specific aspect of radicalization that is common to terrorism studies – the emergence and self-justification of each radicalized individual's views and perceptions of "the others" as potential targets that should be dealt with violence. Three research questions are central to this paper:

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