

# Terrorists Need an Ideology

Written by Catharina Savelkoul

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Terrorists Need an Ideology

<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/15/terrorists-need-an-ideology/>

CATHARINA SAVELKOUL, JUN 15 2022

Terrorism is not an end in itself but a *means* to a political end (Hutchinson, 1978; Drake, 1998: 53; Chenoweth and Moore, 2018). The act of terrorism can be defined as the intentional threat or use of force to create a psychological reaction, for instance, to evoke fear as a signal to the wider population or to achieve wider political goals such as affecting a political outcome (Chenoweth and Moore, 2018). Second, ideology, one of the most elusive concepts in social science (see McLellan, 1995), will be understood as ‘an action-orientated set of political ideas’ for the purpose of this essay (Heywood, 2017: 299; Brahami, 2019). Ideology specifically offers an account of: (i) the existing order; (ii) the desired future; (iii) an explanation of how political change ought to be brought about (Heywood, 2018: 4). This essay argues that terrorists *need* an ideology because an ideology is necessary to define an overarching objective and targets, to have an internal justification for attacks, and, for the terrorist organisation at large, to attract resources and recruits. This argument is structured as follows. Firstly, I present my main argument that an ideology is necessary for the intention, execution, and expansion of terrorist activity. I exemplify this point with the terrorist cases of Anders Behring Breivik, Elliot Rodger, and Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel whose attacks had diverging ideological underpinnings and different levels of organisation. Secondly, I present the rationalist objection to this argument that terrorism can be a rational choice to achieve material gains, glory, and significance, *without* the need for ideology. Third, in response, I argue that this objection *fails* for three reasons: (1) terrorism is a statistically unsuccessful means to an end (Abrahams, 2006); (2) it is difficult to discern a rationalist strategy from its ideological tenets; (3) on an individual level, it is unlikely that terrorism is a rational pursuit for material gains. Fourthly and finally, I raise the second counterargument that terrorists do *not* need an ideology because mental conditions (illnesses) can be the sole driver of radicalisation. I will argue that this objection *fails* because an attack with the sole intention of harm is not terrorism, but illicit violence. This leads me to conclude that terrorists *need* an ideology.

To begin with, terrorists need an ideology because ideology is necessary for the *intention, execution, and expansion* of violent extremist activity (Holbrook and Horgan, 2019). Ideology, as a collective prism to view and make sense of the world, provides a lens through which one defines a purpose or objective and deems a state, institution, or a person guilty or deserving of attack (Drake, 1998). For terrorists, ideology specifically (1) defines the overarching objective as well as corresponding targets, (2) provides the internal justification for the execution of attacks, and (3) for organisations at large, attracts resources and recruits. Terrorists, thus, *need* an ideology. Take for instance the example of Elliot Rodger, the then 22-year-old incel-motivated terrorist, who attacked a sorority house and killed four people (Witt, 2020: 675). The incel (self-identifying involuntary celibates) ideology is largely composed of three beliefs: (i) the societal hierarchy is determined on the basis of physical appearance; (ii) women are drawn only to men based on their physical attractiveness without regard for personality; (iii) women are responsible for their isolation and rejection (Hoffman et al., 2020; Gentry, 2022). Together, this worldview is designed to have far-reaching societal effects (*intention*), targets violence primarily at women (*targets*), allows individuals to justify the attacks (*justification*), and attracts resources and recruits (*expansion*) (Hoffman et al., 2020: 565). Rodger’s 133-page manifesto proved that his incel-ideology was his ultimate motivation for his lone-wolf terrorist attack (Allely and Faccini, 2017). Similarly, Anders Behring Breivik’s, the Norwegian mass murderer, 1,518-page manifesto clearly demonstrates that ideology was the explanatory factor of his terrorist attacks on July 22, 2011 (Hagtvet et al., 2011; Berntzen and Sandberg, 2014; Gullestad, 2017). The Nice terrorist attack, on the other hand, exemplifies how terrorist organisations at large *need* ideology to attract recruits. Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, the terrorist who murdered 86 people in Nice on Bastille Day, searched for online Islamist extremist content a few days before the event, which gave him the internal individual *justification* for the terrorist attack (Horgan, 2008; Holbrook and Horgan,

## Terrorists Need an Ideology

Written by Catharina Savelkoul

2019). The role of ideology in terrorism is, however, not rigid but fluid; for some terrorists, the ideological components might be extremely salient, as Rodger's and Breivik's manifestos show, for others, it might be more subtle, as Lahouaiej-Bouhlel short online search exemplifies. Nonetheless, as Kellen Konrad (1982: 10) states: '[a] terrorist without a cause is not a terrorist'.

One might strongly push back on this argument by arguing that terrorists do not *need* an ideology because collective rational or socio-organisational impetuses drive terrorism instead. This entails that terrorism can be a strategic, rationalist choice and tool of the last resort to successfully achieve material gains, glory, and significance *without* any ideological considerations taken into account. The key assumptions of this approach are: (1) preferences are stable over time; (2) terrorist groups are unitary actors (Neumann and Smith, 2007; Chenoweth and Moore, 2018). To exemplify this objection, take for instance Clarke's (2004) view on the rationale behind the 9/11 attacks: he argues that Al Qaeda's attacks were strategically meant to induce the U.S. into a war in the Middle East and unify the Islamic world. This explanation solely adopts a rationalist perspective and implies that terrorists do *not* need ideology on an organisational level. It, thus, understands terrorism as an effective coercive strategy (Abrahms, 2006: 42). Other rationalist theorists concluded that rationality also successfully applies in the case of Chechnya or suicide bombing (Sandler et al., 1983; Dugan et al., 2005; Hepworth, 2013). This organisational explanation invokes the question: do terrorists on an *individual* level need an ideology to execute the attacks? This view on terrorism also understands individual decisions to be the result of cost-benefit analyses that do *not* need to encompass any ideological components. For instance, these benefits may include the perceived possibility of glory and the fulfilment of the quest for significance (see Borowitz 2005 and McBride 2011). McCauley and Moskaleiko (2010: 89) argue that some might join a terrorist group in search of connection and comradeship. Additionally, Brahimi (2019) puts forward the view that terrorism could be a way out of problematic former life. For instance, according to Brahimi (2019: 298), the reasons for Choudhury, a key recruiter for the Al Qaeda network, to support the terrorist organisation were the misuse of his sister-in-law's money to visit prostitutes in Singapore and his faked cancer diagnosis. In brief, one might push back on the view that terrorists *need* an ideology by arguing that for both individuals and organisations, material or social benefits could outweigh the costs of terrorism without any *need* for ideological considerations.

Yet, this counterargument is problematic in, at least, three ways. First, terrorism is an unsuccessful means to an end given that the strategic aims of terrorist groups are only achieved seven percent of the time (Abrahms, 2006: 43). Instead of focusing on single case studies (cf. Abrahms, 2004) or a selection of a few infamous attacks (see Lake, 2002), the study by Abrahms (2006) analyses the political plight of 28 terrorist organisations since 2001, which led to the conclusion of the seven percent success rate. The finding of a poor rate indicates that terrorists' coercive strategy is rather ineffective and, therefore, an irrational strategy, as one can no longer argue that it is, *on average*, a rational strategy. Second, it is difficult to discern whether Al Qaeda's strategy was a provocation strategy or an inadvertent consequence of an overarching ideological pursuit. Especially when the overall strategy included *non-rational* choices. This is the case for ISIS's decision to symbolically seize the small village of Dabiq in 2014; the town is of no strategic importance but is described in a prophecy by the Prophet Mohammad and was, therefore, taken on ideological and non-rational grounds (Gambhir, 2014; Wignell et al., 2017: 7). Third and finally, on an individual level, if only rational (material) impetuses can drive terrorism, why do so few people become terrorists? And why not commit non-ideological crimes instead? This hints at other explanatory factors at play, *ideological* considerations as I argue, yet others argue that these can solely be *mental illnesses* as I will discuss in the next paragraph. Altogether, these three shortcomings allow me to refute the rationalist objection. Before we conclude that terrorists need an ideology, we must first consider a specific *psychological* approach that draws onto mental illness as a counterargument.

Finally, one can argue that terrorists do *not* need an ideology because psychological factors such as narcissistic rage, paranoia, thrill-seeking, or revenge can drive individuals to radicalisation (Horgan, 2019). There is evidence that mental illness is sometimes associated with terrorists (Gill et al., 2015). Through this lens, one can understand terrorism as the collective behaviour of individuals with the sole motive of inflicting injury and harm, *physically* or *psychologically* (Lawal, 2002: 23). If inflicting harm is the *sole* motive, then it should be possible to be a terrorist without the need for an ideology. We can, however, push back on this line of reasoning with a two-folded critique. First, there is no prevailing evidence that mental illnesses or mental conditions in general play a *key* role in predetermined terrorist participation or action (Horgan, 2019: 209). Crenshaw (1981) and Richardson (2007),

# Terrorists Need an Ideology

Written by Catharina Savelkoul

therefore, doubt the value of explaining terrorists as psychologically disturbed and even note that terrorists are notable for their normalcy. Second, if one acts with the sole purpose to inflict harm, that is, without any need for ideological considerations, then it should not matter who they target nor can there be an overarching (political) objective. If this is the case, following the aforementioned *definition* and most prevailing understanding of terrorism, then it is not terrorism but illicit violent activity instead. This specific psychological approach, thus, fails to sufficiently push back on this essay's main argument that terrorists *need* an ideology. But it does hint at a potential combination of explanatory factors of terrorism, for instance, psychological and ideological factors, as in the case of Anders Behring Breivik who suffered from narcissistic personality disorder amongst other conditions and firmly followed his ideology (see Faccini and Allely, 2016). Yet, without an ideological underpinning, it is not terrorism but illicit violence, and therefore by definition, terrorists *need* an ideology.

To conclude, this essay argued that terrorists *need* ideology because it is necessary for the *intention, execution, and expansion* of terrorist activity. Firstly, using the attacks of Rodger, Breivik, and Lahouaiej-Bouhlel as examples, I argued that individual terrorists *need* ideology to define an overarching objective and targets and to have an internal justification for attacks and, for the terrorist organisation at large, to attract resources and recruits. Secondly, I presented the main objection to this argument. This objection argues that terrorists do *not* need an ideology because collective rational or socio-organisation impetuses drive terrorism instead. I exemplified this objection with the 9/11 attack and the individual case of Choudhury. Thirdly, I refuted this objection for three reasons: (1) terrorism is a statistically unsuccessful means to an end; (2) it is difficult to discern a rationalist strategy from its ideological tenets; (3) on an individual level, if terrorism is a rational pursuit for material gains, then more people might have been terrorists. Finally, I raised a second objection which argues that terrorists do not need an ideology because mental conditions, such as narcissistic personality disorder or psychosis, can, in some cases, be the sole driver to radicalisation instead. In response, I argued that this fails because if there is no overarching objective or purpose, then it is not terrorism but illicit violence instead. Altogether, this leads me to conclude that terrorists *need* an ideology.

## References

- Abrahms, M. (2004). Are terrorists really rational? The Palestinian example. *Orbis*, 48(3), 533-549.
- Abrahms, M. (2006). Why terrorism does not work. *International Security*, 31(2), 42-78.
- Allely, C. S., & Faccini, L. (2017). "Path to intended violence" model to understand mass violence in the case of Elliot Rodger. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 37, 201-209.
- Berntzen, L. E., & Sandberg, S. (2014). The collective nature of lone wolf terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the anti-Islamic social movement. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(5), 759-779.
- Borowitz, A. (2005). *Terrorism for self-glorification: The Herostratos syndrome*. Kent State University Press.
- Brahimi, A. (2019). Ideology and Terrorism. *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, 298.
- Chenoweth, E., & Moore, P. L. (2018). *The politics of terror*. Oxford University Press.
- Crenshaw, M. (1981). The causes of terrorism. *Comparative politics*, 13(4), 379-399.
- Drake, C. J. (1998). The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10(2), 53-85.
- Dugan, L., LaFree, G., & Piquero, A. R. (2005). Testing a rational choice model of airline hijackings. *Criminology*, 43(4), 1031-1065.
- Faccini, L., & Allely, C. S. (2016). Mass violence in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: A case analysis of Anders Breivik using the "Path to Intended and Terroristic Violence" model.

# Terrorists Need an Ideology

Written by Catharina Savelkoul

*Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 31, 229-236.

Gambhir, H. K. (2014). Dabiq: The strategic messaging of the Islamic State. *Institute for the Study of War*, 15(4).

Gentry, C. E. (2022). Misogynistic terrorism: It has always been here. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15(1), 209-224.

Gill, P., Horgan, J., & Deckert, P. (2014). Bombing alone: Tracing the motivations and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 59(2), 425-435.

Gullestad, S. E. (2017, October). Anders Behring Breivik, master of life and death: Psychodynamics and political ideology in an act of terrorism. In *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 207-216). Routledge.

Hagtvet, B., Sørensen, Ø., & Steine, B. A. (Eds.). (2011). *Ideologi og terror: totalitære ideer og regimer*. Dreyer.

Hepworth, D. P. (2013). Analysis of Al-Qaeda Terrorist Attacks to Investigate Rational Action. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7(2), 23-38.

Heywood, A. (2017). *Political ideologies: An introduction*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

Heywood, A. (2018). *Essentials of political ideas*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Hoffman, B., Ware, J., & Shapiro, E. (2020). Assessing the threat of incel violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(7), 565-587.

Holbrook, D., & Horgan, J. (2019). Terrorism and ideology. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13(6), 2-15.

Horgan, J. (2008). From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618(1), 80-94.

Horgan, J. G. (2019). Psychological approaches to the study of terrorism. *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, 207-223.

Hutchinson, M. C. (1974). *Revolutionary terrorism: the FLN in Algeria, 1954-1962*.

Kellen, K. (1982). *On terrorists and terrorism*. Rand Corp Santa Monica Ca.

Lake, D. A. (2002). Rational extremism: Understanding terrorism in the twenty-first century. *Dialogue IO*, 1(1), 15-28.

Lawal, O. A. (2002). Social-psychological considerations in the emergence and growth of terrorism. *The Psychology of Terrorism: Programs and Practices in Response and Prevention*, 4.

McBride, M. K. (2011). The logic of terrorism: Existential anxiety, the search for meaning, and terrorist ideologies. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(4), 560-581.

McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2010). Individual and group mechanisms of radicalization. *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalisation and Disengagement*, 82.

McLellan, D. (1995). *Ideology*. University of Minnesota Press.

Neumann, P. R., & Smith, M. L. R. (2007). *The strategy of terrorism: How it works, and why it fails*. Routledge.

Richardson, L. (2006). *What terrorists want: Understanding the enemy, containing the threat*. Random House.

## **Terrorists Need an Ideology**

Written by Catharina Savelkoul

Sandler, T., Tschirhart, J. T., & Cauley, J. (1983). A theoretical analysis of transnational terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 77(1), 36-54.

Wignell, P., Tan, S., O'Halloran, K. L., & Lange, R. (2017). A mixed methods empirical examination of changes in emphasis and style in the extremist magazines Dabiq and Rumiya. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(2), 2-20.

Witt, T. (2020). Incel masculinities, secular sainthood, and justifications of ideological violence. *Social Identities*, 26(5), 675-689.