



## Crime and terrorism

# THE POLITICISATION OF VIOLENCE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO RADICALISATION



The majority of the suspected perpetrators behind recent terrorist attacks in the West had been involved in violent crime prior to the attacks. This indicates that it is not necessarily ideological influence that leads to terrorism. As a consequence, the current concept of radicalisation should be supplemented with an understanding that criminal violence may be transformed into political violence.

From January 2012 to August 2015, 21 attacks, which have been defined as Islamist terrorism, were carried out in North America, Australia and Western Europe. Prior to the attacks, 18 of the 25 suspected perpetrators had been involved in other types of crime. In most

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Practitioners** should be able to supplement the predominant understanding of ideological radicalisation with the concept of the politicisation of violence.
- **Politicians** should support the integration of radicalisation prevention and ordinary crime prevention activities, which already takes place in practice.
- **The authorities** should be guaranteed the necessary resources so that the current concern about people returning from conflict zones does not lead to other areas being given a lower priority.

# We recommend that ideological radicalisation be supplemented with a concept of politicisation of violence

When individuals already have experience of violence, it makes little sense to assume that they must undergo an extensive intellectual process in order to use violence. Therefore it is not sufficient to understand the use of violence as the result of processes triggered by ideology.

cases, this involved drug-related crime, assault, attempted murder, robbery, possession of weapons and sex crimes – crimes that most probably involve violence. The fact that people who commit terrorism have also been involved in other types of crime is nothing new, but the fact that the proportion of people with a violent past in recent terror attacks is so large is remarkable.

These figures cannot be used to suggest any simple causal relationship or even correlation between having a criminal past and involvement in terrorism, but they do indicate that the recent focus on foreign fighters as a risk group has been too narrow and that other factors should receive equal attention. Five of the 25 suspected perpetrators had been in a conflict zone, namely Afghanistan, Dagestan, Yemen, Mali and Syria. However, all five had also been involved in other types of crime.

Our objective is not to single out people with a criminal past as a terrorist threat or to recommend that those who have spent time in conflict zones should be ignored by the authorities. Both may be an indication of experience with violence, which our other research has shown plays a role in involvement in terrorism. This perspective, however, is difficult to address properly within the frameworks of the predominant understandings of radicalisation that revolve around ideology as the cause of terrorism.

## Blurred lines between terrorism and ordinary crime

The fact that criminals comprise such a large share of the people who commit terrorism may, among other things, be explained by the strategic adaptation that has taken place in the global jihadist movement as a reaction to the increased efforts to prevent attacks.

Both al-Qaeda and Islamic State have explicitly encouraged sympathisers to carry out attacks in their home countries on their own instead of travelling to conflict zones or contacting the organisations, in order to minimise the risk of exposure.

Such encouragement appeals to a new group of people who would not necessarily want to join professional organisations, with their rigid admittance requirements and demanding training. They attract people who are not only motivated by the objectives of the organisations, but also by their own agendas, and who already have experience of violence and have



Read more about the trends in attacks in the West in recent years in the DIIS policy brief, 'Understanding and prevention after the attacks in Copenhagen' of March 2015. The publication can be downloaded from [diis.dk](http://diis.dk).



access to the necessary resources, such as weapons. As a consequence, the boundaries between terrorism and ordinary crime become porous. It can be difficult to determine whether an attack is terrorism because the suspected perpetrator's motives are not obvious, and because an attack may be both terrorism and ordinary crime, for example, revenge killings. This further emphasises the need to carefully reconsider how we can best understand and prevent terrorism, and whether the current understanding of radicalisation is helpful.

### **New frames for interpretation**

Based on our findings, we must ask whether the predominant understanding of radicalisation as increasing ideological conviction that may lead to violence is sufficient at this point in time. This interpretation is based on the assumption that the use of violence is unnatural for the individual and that it therefore presupposes a process in which ideological influences are able to break down this natural barrier.

When individuals already have experience of violence, it makes little sense to assume that they must go through a long intellectual process in order to use violence. Therefore it is not sufficient to analyse violence as the result of processes driven by ideology: we must also consider processes in which one type of



Mohamed Merah (at the top) killed seven people and wounded five during a number of shooting incidents in Toulouse and Montauban in 2012 (at the bottom). Merah had previously been involved in violent criminality. © AP/Bruno Martin

violence ("ordinary" crime) is transformed into another type of violence (terrorism).

Recent research indicates that the involvement of individuals in terrorism may be the result of very different processes. We recommend that this insight be incorporated more fully into efforts to prevent terrorism by working with several supplementary frames of interpretation.

In order to improve our understanding of the relatively large share of people with a violent criminal past, we recommend that ideological radicalisation be supplemented with an understanding of the politicisation of violence, in which people who already have violence as part of their communication repertoire, so to speak, attach an ideology to the violence, thus giving it a political dimension. In doing so, the violence is attributed a higher meaning, which not only justifies its continued use, but also glorifies it. At the same time, the person concerned transforms his or her identity from selfish criminal to self-sacrificing hero. In such cases there is no barrier to violence that must be broken down, and the ideology is therefore not crucial for the use of violence, but rather for how and against whom it is used. The explanation for why the person uses violence must be found elsewhere.

### **Practical implications**

The inclusion of the politicisation of violence as a notion supplementing radicalisation implies that prevention of terrorism may take place within other frameworks than has been the case so far.

Instead of focusing on ideology as the source of all evil and attempting to contain, ridicule or argue against it, one must, within this frame of interpretation, attempt to influence the criminogenic factors that play a role in the use of violence. Within the realm of ordinary crime prevention, both knowledge about and experience in counteracting these factors already exists.

In Denmark, many of the so-called radicalisation prevention activities are in effect already close to ordinary crime prevention activities and do not explicitly address ideologies. But the practitioners who are involved in these prevention activities are constantly forced to relate to the predominant understanding of radicalisation, including in cases where, with their professionalism, they can see that it makes little sense.

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