The Psychology of Terrorism Revisited:
An Integrated Model of Radicalization and Terrorism

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Abstract

In the media there are two common explanations for terrorist attacks: Those who commit these acts are either described as mentally ill or as religious fundamentalists. For example, when Anders Breivik killed 77 teenagers he was declared insane suffering from paranoid and schizophrenia, whereas the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks were described as religious zealots. Unfortunately, the scientific literature also simplifies radicalization and terrorism in a similar fashion; the field is divided between person and situation explanations of terrorism and radicalization. However, to understand terrorism and radicalization adequately the dichotomy of person-situation needs to be readdressed. This dissertation begins to explore the premises that the potential for participating in asymmetrical collective violence must be understood as interplay between intra-individual, social psychological and external/societal factors. Broadly speaking, this dissertation aims to answer the following question: What are the social and psychological factors and processes that contribute to the motivations behind the radicalization of first, second and third generation of Muslim Europeans? This dissertation first addressees the dichotomy of person and situation and proposes an integrated model of terrorism and radicalization. Second, integrating perspectives from various line of research I demonstrate how factors from the different domains of research relate, and more importantly, complement each other in shaping circumstances, which will make radicalization more or less likely to occur. Finally, I explore the influence of person factors such as personality traits. While previous research on extremism and violent has overlooked the potential role of non-pathological personality differences, it is proposed here that non-pathological personality characteristics would predict both violent and non-violent behavioral intentions and actual behavior among Muslims in defense of their group. Therefore, this work aims to extend knowledge on terrorism beyond existing literature, which tends to focus exclusively on either situational factors or psychopathology.
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Bio: Milan Obaidi is a Postdoctoral Scholar at Uppsala University, at the department of psychology. He holds a BA in psychology from Aalborg University and a Master of psychology from Copenhagen University, Denmark. He has studied psychology at Harvard University as a Fulbright scholar from 2007 to 2009 and visited Harvard as a visiting doctoral student while pursuing his PhD in Social and Political Science at European University Institute. His PhD dissertation explored social and psychological factors that contribute to the motivations behind the radicalization of some Muslim Europeans. In particular, he investigated the extent to which individual psychological needs, feelings and motives pertaining to the management of deprivation, victimization, uncertainty, group threat, and injustice are related to Muslim Europeans’ attitudes towards committing and supporting violence in Europe.