Twenty Important Journal Articles and Reports on Terrorist Radicalization

Selected and Reviewed by David C. Hofmann

Staying aware of research on terrorism can be challenging for both academic and non-academic researchers, with a multitude of books, articles and reports of varying degrees of quality being produced on a yearly basis. Andrew Silke notes that the publication of books on terrorism nearly jumped tenfold after 9/11, from 150 titles in 2000 to 1108 the following year, and 1767 in 2002 [1]. As a part of this larger trend, research on terrorist radicalization has seen a spike in interest as a result of the aftermath of 9/11 and the 7/7 attacks. The London bombings in 2005 also muddled the waters further by generating interest in the phenomenon of “homegrown terrorism”, where self-starter cells of radicalized individuals mobilize against their host countries with little or no material support from foreign terrorist entities. This has created a whole new area of empirical inquiry, beyond the traditional analysis of foreign terrorist radicalization.

With the overabundance of information available on terrorist radicalization, wading through the sea of literature can be daunting. As a starting point for those interested in terrorist radicalization, I have compiled this list of twenty articles and reports that I have found to be particularly helpful for understanding the basics of the subject. I have chosen to omit books from my selection in order to offer the reader a wider selection of theories, models, strategies and readings that can be tackled in short sittings.

While anthropology, psychology and political science are fairly well represented among the articles and reports selected for review, social scientists belonging to those disciplines may note certain conspicuous omissions. This is primarily a result of space constraints and my own research orientation as a sociologist. As a result, my selection leans toward articles and reports that have some degree of synergy with my own discipline. Regardless, it is my hope that the majority of readers will find articles of interest from the selection below.

The approach I took in reviewing the selected articles and reports is akin to a miniature literature review or an annotated bibliography. The purpose is to provide the reader with a concise summary of the content of each article/report that goes beyond a cursory glance at the abstract. The most salient arguments and aspects of each article or report are highlighted, and are occasionally supplemented with opinions. These opinions are meant to share my impressions of the importance and impact of the item being reviewed.

As a final note, I would like to state that this list is by no means an exhaustive showcase of available research on terrorist radicalization. I recommend that those interested in further reading on terrorist radicalization consult Eric Price and Alex Schmid’s bibliography, available in Perspectives on Terrorism [2]:

The twenty articles and reports chosen for review are listed in alphabetical order:

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1 This research note was originally submitted to and published in the online journal, Perspectives on Terrorism.

With the Internet playing a crucial function in homegrown terrorist radicalization, it has become an increasingly important security issue to devise strategies to counter jihadist online narratives. To this effect, Omar Ashour outlines a three-pillared strategy for the implementation of online counter-narratives. The first pillar is the message, which requires the creation of multi-layered and attractive counter-messages to terrorist group ideology that are tailored to individual groups (e.g. a counter-narrative for a Right-Wing terror group like Kahane Chai would not be congruent for the IRA, and vice-versa). The second pillar focuses on the messengers, who must appear to have some sort of legitimacy or credibility with the target group. Ashour notes that there is a currently a critical mass of former jihadist militants to tap into as a resource for delivering counter-narrative messages. The third and final pillar is the media, which requires careful publication and dissemination of the counter-narrative message.


Anthropologist Scott Atran’s article on the genesis of suicide terrorism is now somewhat dated but it touches upon some crucial elements of terrorist radicalization. The article asserts that the most effective way of defending against future suicide attacks is combating the process of radicalization which is capitalized upon by suicide-bomber recruiting organizations. Notably, the radicalization and recruitment of suicide bombers is identified as an institutional-level phenomenon. Atran argues that preventing radicalization of potential suicide bombing recruits requires macro-level solutions, such as applying the right amount of pressure and inducements to undermine communal support for suicide bombing, empowering moderates, and addressing grievances and humiliation in the Muslim community. Elements of Atran’s conclusions are evident in subsequent theories of terrorist radicalization, and this short but informative article serves as an ideal starting point for those interested in radicalization.


In this article focused on homegrown terrorism, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller report the findings of a two-year fieldwork study in the UK, Canada, Denmark, France and the Netherlands. Their research is divided into two parts. The first is focused on addressing a gap in the current literature: the lack of terrorism research that employs control groups. This article does so by comparing “permissive factors” between radicals who become terrorists, and radicals who do not engage in violence. The second part of the article examines the process of radicalization, and differentiates between types of radicalization that escalate to violence and those that do not. The authors identify four elements of radicalization that are often overlooked, but have the potential to help understand how radicalization can lead to violence for some, but not others: (1) the emotional pull to act
in the face of injustice, (2) thrill, excitement, and coolness, (3) status and internal code of honour, and (4) peer pressure.


This FBI report outlines forensic psychologist Randy Borum’s four-stage heuristic model of terrorist radicalization. Borum’s model begins with the recognition by the pre-radicalized individual or group that an event or condition is wrong (“It’s not right”). This is followed with a framing of the event or condition as selectively unjust (“It’s not fair”). The third step occurs when others are held responsible for the perceived injustice (“It’s your fault”). The final step involves the demonization of the ‘other’ (“You’re evil”). While somewhat dated and replaced by newer and more complex theories, Borum’s model is a very good example of an early heuristic attempt at systematizing and understanding processes of terrorist radicalization.


Manni Crone and Martin Harrow’s article takes an interesting position by attempting to address certain ambiguities surrounding the definition of homegrown terrorism. They suggest that homegrown terrorism can be reduced to two dimensions: belonging and autonomy. Within these dimensions, the authors propose four ideal types of Western homegrown terrorism: (1) internal autonomous, (2) internal affiliated, (3) external autonomous, and (4) external affiliated. Four illustrative cases of Danish homegrown terrorism are used to highlight the characteristics of each ideal type. This is then followed with a quantitative analysis of Islamist terrorism from 1989-2008, examining whether Western terrorism has seen a shift towards homegrown attacks. The authors find that since 2003 there has been a rise in both internal and autonomous acts of terrorism, but that most internal attacks have some form of external affiliation.


In her review of the current state of literature on violent radicalization in Europe, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen identifies three major research trends: French sociology, social movement/social network theory, and empirical case studies. She summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in order to qualitatively assess the state of the literature on radicalization. While the summary of the identified major research trends on radicalization is helpful, the strength of this article is its critical examination of the state of radicalization research. Dalgaard-Nielsen echoes the often-repeated criticism that radicalization research lacks a solid empirical foundation, advocating for the increased use of control groups to properly account for changes in radicalization. She also points out despite an increasing trend of focusing on leadership in terrorist radicalization, there is a paucity of data on their motivations and what separates them from other terrorists.
The author concludes with pertinent and useful suggestions on how to circumvent issues by gathering empirical data on terrorist radicalization.


This article by Lorne Dawson, a sociologist of religion, points out the conspicuous and somewhat puzzling lack of dialogue between research on homegrown radicalization and new religious movements (NRMs). Dawson begins his analysis by stating the reasons why opening lines of communication between NRM and terrorism research would be fruitful, why it never came to pass, and the grounds with which to begin this dialogue. He notes and delineates three primary points of contact between both subject areas: (1) who, how and why people join NRMs and terrorist groups, (2) how both types of groups maintain and intensify member commitments, and (3) why some NRMs become violent. Dawson’s article concludes with six ‘lessons learned’ from his preliminary comparative analysis between NRMs and terrorist radicalization, which serve as grounds for future research into the potentially fruitful liaison between both subject matters.


In this article, psychologists Michael King and Donald Taylor review five major radicalization models, highlighting their commonalities and the discrepancies. The authors identify and discuss three common elements found to be important to the process of radicalization that appear in each model: the phenomenon of relative deprivation, struggles over identity, and the presence of certain personality characteristics. Among the discrepancies, King and Taylor point out the differing formats and portrayals of the radicalization process (emergent vs. linear progression) across the five models. They then carry the analysis further with discussions on the role of extremist organizations in fomenting radicalization and the role of individual characteristics in the radicalization process. The article concludes with three major suggestions for avenues of future research related to the common elements they found in the models, namely, more research on: (1) the affective reactions to group relative deprivation, (2) the management of identities, and (3) the relevant personality characteristics.


The London bombings of 2005 caused a shift in radicalization research from the external threat of Al-Qaida, to the internal issue of homegrown terrorist radicalization. In a case study of the London Bombers, Aidan Kirby argues that previous conceptions of terrorist radicalization which framed radicalization as a series of networks connected to a formal and organized jihad is not nuanced enough to explain the dynamics of self-starting
homegrown terror cells. To further his argument, Kirby points to the analytical confusion that emerged after the London bombings as to whether the perpetrators were connected formally with Al-Qaeda, or acted on their own. Kirby draws heavily on Marc Sageman’s *Understanding Terror Networks* [3] in his argument that new paradigms focused on social dynamics are necessary in order to understand how homegrown terror cells emerge autonomously. He concludes his argument by highlighting the importance of the Internet as a tool allowing for self-starting homegrown terrorism cells to radicalize and obtain operational knowledge.


This article addresses an important question that has been overlooked in the research on terrorist radicalization: is the radicalization process the same for converts and non-converts to Islam? Scott Matthew Kleinmann’s research focuses on Sunni homegrown terrorism in the US from 2001 to 2010, and his data were coded to examine individual, group, and mass factors influencing radicalization. The research findings show that individual/internal forces play a greater role in the radicalization of Sunni converts, and group level processes (e.g. ties of kinship and friendship) affect both Sunni converts and non-converts in a similar fashion. Kleinmann’s findings provide unique insight into differing radicalization processes and identifies an important sub-category for future comparative analysis – the convert.


At the time of publishing of this review, psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko’s article on the mechanisms of political radicalization is the most accessed online article in *Terrorism and Political Violence*. This article serves as a basis for *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* [4], an influential book on radicalization written by the same authors. In the article, the authors identify twelve mechanisms of radicalization across three levels of analysis: individuals, groups and mass publics. Of the twelve identified mechanisms, the authors note that only two are autonomous, while the remaining ten are reactive. This leads them to make an important argument that current research on radicalization is focused too much on the individual actors, and not enough on the dynamics of inter-group conflict.


Fathhali M. Moghaddam’s article is a good example of a theory that treats radicalization as a linear process that progresses along a pathway leading to extreme violence. Moghaddam explains radicalization as a metaphorical ascension up a staircase with six different levels of commitment. Individual perception of injustice, relative deprivation,
and morality are central to his explanation of why certain people ascend the staircase to terrorism when millions of others experience the same conditions do not. His metaphor begins with a ground floor in which a select few individuals suffering from relative deprivation ascend to the first floor of radicalization. The first floor is characterized by a desire to seek greater justice for conditions of relative depravity, shame, and injustice. Individuals climbing the staircase feel that they are being blocked from justice will ascend to the second floor. On the second floor, Moghaddam explains that certain predisposed individuals are influenced by leaders to displace aggression onto an enemy, and they will climb to the third floor where they will gradually engage and identify with terrorist morality. The fourth floor involves the concretization of a dualistic world-view with both in-groups and out-groups. The final floor is the point of no return: selection and training of individuals for terrorist violence. For those interested in further reading, Moghaddam expands upon this article in his book, From the Terrorists’ Point of View [5].

- **Mullins, S. (2012). Iraq versus lack of integration: understanding the motivations of contemporary Islamist terrorists in Western countries.** *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 4*(2), 110-133.

Sam Mullin’s article is a review piece that covers some of the important ‘driving forces’ behind home-grown terrorist radicalization. While Mullins offers little innovation on the subject, the article’s strength lies in its concise coverage of some of the major ‘hot’ topics surrounding research on Western homegrown terrorism. More specifically, he reviews the research on: (1) psychological abnormality, (2) individual adversity, (3) Western material and political conditions, (4) comparative conditions between the US and Europe, (5) identity crises, (6) Western foreign policy in Iraq, (7) the influence of Islamism, (8) the role of religion, and (9) social motives. Mullins does a fair job covering each topic, and his article is a good place for the reader interested in quickly absorbing some of the major issues and debates surrounding research on homegrown terrorism. The article concludes with a discussion on theoretical and counter-terrorism implications surrounding the state of current research on homegrown terrorism.


This case study on the radicalization of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood addresses an often-overlooked factor in the radicalization process: the dynamics of leadership within the radicalization process. Christine Sixta Rinehart argues that there are three major factors which contributed to the radicalization of the Brotherhood: (1) the influence of a charismatic leader, (2) the radicalization over time of the Brotherhood’s leadership, and (3) frustration at the failure of the Brotherhood to radicalize the population at large. Rinehart’s research utilizes theories like frustration-agression and Weber’s work on charismatic authority as the basis of her analysis. She concludes that when combined, the three aforementioned factors are what motivated the Brotherhood to commit acts of terrorism.
This influential and often-quoted report by two members of the NYPD Intelligence Division puts forth a model for explaining the home-grown terrorist radicalization of Islamic jihadists. Written in a terse and explanatory style for law enforcement practitioners, the NYPD report focuses on a comparative study of five international cases of home-grown jihadi terrorist groups and attempts to create a conceptual framework explaining the home-grown radicalization process. The authors describe a four step process: (1) pre-radicalization – focusing on the environmental and social factors promoting terrorism; (2) self-identification – marking the beginning of the exploration of the Salafi Islamist worldview, due to some personal crisis or cognitive event; (3) indoctrination – involving an intensification of radical beliefs and a belief in action to further the Salafist cause; and (4) jihadization – the self-identification of members of a group as holy warriors, and the commencement of operational planning for a terrorist attack. Among their findings, the authors present a number of key implications which continue to influence the study of home-grown terrorism, such as Al-Qaeda’s inspirational role, the failure to adequately integrate 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} generation immigrants, the futility of profiling home-grown terrorists, and so on.


The aim of Andrew Silke’s article is a review of the quality of psychological research evidence on jihadi radicalization. Before systematizing the available literature, Silke begins by criticizing the lack of primary research and the overreliance on newspaper reports and secondary material in current psychological research. Adopting the general view that terrorist radicalization is a gradual process, Silke identifies and discusses a number of common but complex inter-meshing factors found in the backgrounds of terrorists: (1) age and gender, (2) education, career and marriage, (3) social identity, (4) marginalization and discrimination, (5) catalytic events and perceived injustice, (6) status and personal rewards, and (7) opportunity and recruitment. Silke concludes with a discussion of how these common factors go against the common perception of the terrorist as “mentally-ill”, stressing how radicalization occurs in small groups of like-minded individuals who gradually commit more and more to a radical cause. He argues that the focus for psychologists of terrorism should be on small-group dynamics and psychological processes, and less on the psychopathological or criminal-like aspects of terrorist radicalization.


As the title suggests, this article presents Max Taylor and John Horgan’s conceptual framework for understanding and addressing the psychology of terrorism. Much like the main argument in Horgan’s book, *The Psychology of Terrorism* [6], the authors argue an
important point – that radicalization and engagement in terrorism is a gradual, step-by-step process, which cannot be explained by reversion to theories about a psychopathological state of mind. The article continues with a discussion of pathways into and out of terrorism, where three critical process variables are identified: (1) setting events, (2) personal factors, and (3) social, political and/or organizational contexts. The authors conclude that future research should focus on understanding factors such as decisional contexts, individual choices and the implications of involvement in terrorist activities.


Robin Thompson’s article is a policy piece that focuses on explaining how and why social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are effective radicalization tools. She argues that the use of social media in terrorist radicalization is not a transient phenomenon, and poses a real threat to national security by encouraging homegrown terrorism. The article presents its case with three observations: (1) the ubiquity and reach of social media, (2) arguing that social media is the “perfect voice” for radicals trying to rally supporters to a cause, and (3) an analysis of how social media played a role in the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The article concludes with policy suggestions aimed at implementing a response to the potential radicalization effects of social media. Notably, Thompson argues that the intelligence and national security community needs to become more involved in social media themselves in order to better understand its potential as a medium for radicalization.


Bert Useem and Obie Clayton’s article addresses a vastly understudied aspect of terrorism studies: the radicalization of prisoners. In interviews with 210 American prison officials and 270 American inmates, the authors set forth to gauge whether the social environment in correctional institutions is conducive for radicalization into jihadi terrorism. While there are a number of methodological issues with the sample that hinder obtaining comprehensive results, the authors conclude that there is a low level of radicalization among US inmates. They identify four reasons why this might be: (1) the increase of order in prisons, (2) institutional boundaries between inmates and outside radical communities, (3) anti-radicalization initiatives executed by agency leadership, and (4) the low levels of education of inmates in comparison to other terrorists. The authors conclude by arguing that prison life has a very low level of effect on whether or not an American inmate will become radicalized to jihadi terrorism.


Lorenzo Vidinio’s main argument in this article is that homegrown terrorism has a long history within the US, despite the widespread view that it is mainly a recent and mostly
European phenomenon. Vidinio points to violent acts by African American Muslim organizations, the 1993 Landmarks Plot, travelling jihadi fighters in the 1990’s, the Post 9/11 boom, and a number of lone wolf terrorists as examples of this long tradition of homegrown US terrorism. He argues that the failure to recognize this situation stems from a ‘delayed awareness’ pre-9/11 because intelligence communities had greater legal and cultural impediments to monitoring internal terrorist threats. The London bombings in 2005 further catalyzed the interest of US authorities in detecting and neutralizing homegrown terrorist threats. Vidinio continues by identifying four reasons why there is a divergence between the comparatively low levels of homegrown radicalization amongst Muslims in the US than in Europe: (1) better economic conditions, (2) geographic dispersion, (3) immigration patterns, and (4) tougher immigration policies. The article concludes with a brief analysis of the history of the US government’s response to homegrown terrorism.

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**Notes**


