

## From Radicalization to Terrorism: The Role of Sponsorship in Sustaining Political Violence

by

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### Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between radicalization and terrorism by highlighting how extreme ideologies cannot fully account for the growth in organized political violence. Even though it may provide the drive or desire to use violence, radicalization does not always result in terrorist activity. The paper mentions how the crucial element that converts intellectual ambition into long-term practical capacity is active and passive sponsorship. Through engaging with prominent scholars such as Martha Crenshaw, Randy Borum, Robert Pape, and Daniel Byman, my research discovers a persistent gap in the corpus of literature that explains how violence is structured and why individuals become radicalized. The case study on Israel and Palestine demonstrates how organizational resilience is strengthened by external finance, governance structures, and regional support networks. The paper further argues that effective counterterrorism strategies must address both extremist ideology and the material and institutional conditions that sustain violence. By combining theoretical debates with contemporary evidence, the study concludes that terrorism is best understood as the product of an interaction between radicalization and sponsorship.

### Introduction

Terrorism is one of the most complex and disputed kinds of political violence in contemporary global order. It is usually defined as violence used for political purposes, however, academic discussions about the causes and mechanisms of terrorism still lack consensus. According to Martha Crenshaw, terrorism is a planned form of symbolic violence used by an organized group in order to send a message to a larger audience.<sup>1</sup>

The Global Terrorism Database records more than 200,000 terrorist incidents worldwide since 1970, demonstrating both the persistence and evolving nature of terrorism across historical periods.<sup>2</sup>

The scale and persistence of terrorism documented by the GTD must also be read alongside the significant variation in attack frequency and lethality across regions. The Global Terrorism Index 2024 found that total deaths from terrorism increased by 22 per cent to 8,352 in 2023, reaching their highest level since 2017, despite a simultaneous 22 per cent decrease in the number of recorded incidents, indicating that attacks are becoming fewer but considerably more deadly.<sup>3</sup> This pattern suggests that the organizations responsible for contemporary terrorism are not merely ideologically motivated cells but are operationally sophisticated entities capable of concentrating destructive capacity, a distinction that ideological explanations alone cannot adequately explain.

Much of the literature focuses on the search for the root causes behind terrorism, such as economic disparities, political marginalization, and ideological radicalism. However, there

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<sup>1</sup>Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism' (1981) 13(4) Comparative Politics 379.

<sup>2</sup>National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (University of Maryland 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2024* (IEP 2024) 2

appears to be a fundamental problem — that several people suffer from deprivation, oppression, or radical ideas, but only some participate in terrorist activities. Therefore, according to Randy Borum, it is crucial to differentiate between radicalization and involvement in terrorism, since the two processes should not be mistaken for one another.<sup>4</sup>

While not all individuals who undergo radicalization engage in terrorism, most terrorist actors emerge from environments shaped by radical beliefs or processes of radicalization. This distinction is reinforced by empirical studies showing that exposure to extremist narratives is far more widespread than actual participation in terrorist violence.<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues that radicalization alone does not explain terrorism. Although radicalization can provide the necessary motivation, it cannot explain how ideology turns into structured violence. The hypothesis put forward is that sponsorship, both active and passive, is the key factor that enables and sustains terrorism. By providing various resources, networks and operational capacity, sponsorship transforms ideology into political violence. Thus, by examining the ideas of theorists and analysing the conflict of Israel-Palestine, the paper contends how terrorism emerges through the combination of ideological motive and structural sponsorship.

### **Understanding Radicalization**

The term 'radicalization' is commonly seen as the key element behind terrorism, however, the connection between the former and the latter is anything but straightforward. According to Randy Borum, radicalization refers to the process by which individuals adopt extremist beliefs but does not necessarily lead to participation in terrorism. The point is crucial since it undermines the assumption that an ideology alone can be enough for committing acts of violence.<sup>6</sup>

The European security reports have repeatedly shown that thousands of individuals may come under observation for extremist tendencies, yet only a very limited number progress toward operational violence.<sup>7</sup> The Europol EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024 provides a concrete illustration of this disparity: while 426 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offences across twenty-two EU Member States in 2023, only 120 attacks were recorded in total, and just five jihadist attacks were completed.<sup>8</sup> The quantitative gulf between arrests and completed attacks underlines the point that ideological exposure and even operational planning do not reliably produce violence in the absence of additional enabling conditions.

The disjunction between online exposure to extremist content and actual participation in violence has been confirmed empirically in the years following the rise of Islamic State propaganda. Research by the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network found that the internet functions primarily as a multiplier that modulates other pre-existing radicalization factors rather than operating as an independent cause of violence, with different

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<sup>4</sup>Randy Borum, 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research' (2012) 4(4) *Journal of Strategic Security* 37.

<sup>5</sup>Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (2023).

<sup>6</sup>Borum (n 3).

<sup>8</sup> Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024* (Europol 2024) 5

platforms fulfilling distinct roles in dissemination and community consolidation without necessarily generating operational commitment.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Walter Laqueur warns that generalizations about terrorist behaviour are inherently limited, as patterns observed in one context do not universally apply across time and space. Thus, people facing identical grievances can react to them in a completely different manner, meaning that radicalization is determined by multiple socio-political and personal factors.<sup>10</sup>

Post 2014, the growth of digital propaganda further illustrates the complexity of how millions may encounter extremist content online but only a negligible minority engage in terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, radicalization must be understood as a permissive factor rather than a determinative factor in the emergence of terrorism. While it may generate the potential for violence, it does not ensure that such potential will necessarily translate into action. This reveals a gap in the existing literature, which largely concentrates on the development of extremist beliefs while devoting comparatively less attention to the conditions and mechanisms through which those beliefs are converted into organized violence. The distinction is essential in contemporary societies where ideological exposure has become easier, but violent mobilization still requires additional enabling factors.

### Limits of Ideology and Root Cause Explanations

Even though ideology and root causes have dominated much of the academic literature, these explanations remain incomplete about why some individuals mobilize into violence. Joshua Sinai argues that terrorism must be understood within its broader political and socio-economic context. While this perspective is important, it does not fully explain why only a small number of individuals engage in violence despite widespread grievances. Large populations across regions affected by inequality, conflict, or repression do not participate in terrorism, which thereby weakens any direct causal relationship between deprivation and violence.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Robert Pape challenges the notion that terrorism is purely driven by religious extremism. His analyses of suicide terrorism demonstrate that it involves a form of strategic logic in pursuit of political goals, suggesting that terrorism is not merely a result of ideological commitment, but involves calculated decision-making by organized groups.<sup>13</sup>

The strategic logic Pape identifies is itself dependent on the pre-existence of organizational infrastructure capable of selecting, training, and deploying individuals for suicide missions. As Byman's organizational analysis later confirmed, the availability of such infrastructure is not a product of ideology but of sustained resource acquisition, which in turn depends on the patronage environments that ideology alone cannot create.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Online Radicalisation* (Publications Office of the European Union 2023) 12

<sup>10</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford University Press 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Maura Conway, 'Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Contested Case Resolution' (2017) 9(1) *Policy & Internet* 77.

<sup>12</sup> Joshua Sinai, 'A Democratic Approach to Resolve Terrorism's Root Causes' (2005) 1(1) *Democracy and Security* 63.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A Pape, 'The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism' (2003) 97(3) *American Political Science Review* 343.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Byman, 'Understanding, and Misunderstanding, State Sponsorship of Terrorism' (2022) 45(12) *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 1031, 1033

Pape's well-known dataset identified 188 suicide terrorist attacks between 1980 and 2001, many of which were associated with strategic objectives rather than purely theological motives.<sup>15</sup>

Comparing the perspectives of Sinai and Pape reveals a gap in the literature. While Sinai emphasises structural conditions and Pape highlights strategic behavior, both approaches focus primarily on motivation rather than capability. If ideology alone were sufficient, participation in terrorism would be far more widespread. The fact that it is not suggests that additional factors are necessary to enable violence, pointing toward the importance of examining the mechanisms that transform belief into action.<sup>16</sup>

### **Sponsorship as the Enabling Mechanism**

To address the transition between motivation and action, it is necessary to examine the role of sponsorship. Daniel Byman defines sponsorship as the provision of support to terrorist groups, including funding, training, and safe havens. Furthermore, he distinguishes between active sponsorship, which involves direct assistance, and passive sponsorship, which includes tolerance and failure to prevent terrorist activity.<sup>17</sup>

The comparison becomes essential when it is found that many groups survive not only through direct aid, but also through weak enforcement, porous borders, and permissive environments.<sup>18</sup>

Sponsorship plays a critical role in transforming individual intent into collective action. Although radicalization may increase a person's inclination to use violence, it does not provide them the tools to do so successfully. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) generated major revenues at its territorial peak through taxation, extortion, and oil smuggling, thus illustrating how financial capacity can sustain violence over time.<sup>19</sup> The July 2025 report of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the most comprehensive update on terrorist financing risks in a decade, confirmed that porous borders, weak governance, and informal economies collectively enable terrorist organizations to raise funds through extortion, resource exploitation, and smuggling at scales that individual radicalized actors could not achieve independently.<sup>20</sup> The same report found that sixty-nine per cent of jurisdictions assessed globally exhibited major or structural deficiencies in investigating and prosecuting terrorist financing cases, illustrating how institutional passivity continues to sustain operational capacity even in the absence of direct state support.

According to my analysis, sponsorship should be understood as the central mechanism that bridges the gap between motivation and capability. Without access to resources and organizational support, most radicalized individuals are unlikely to engage in sustained or large-scale violence. This suggests that sponsorship is not merely a supporting factor but a necessary condition for the emergence and persistence of terrorism.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, sponsorship contributes to the longevity of terrorist organizations. Groups that receive consistent support are better able to adapt, survive, and expand their activities.

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<sup>15</sup>Pape (n 9). Pape's dataset covered 188 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001.

<sup>16</sup>Sinai (n 8); Pape (n 9).

<sup>17</sup>Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press 2005).

<sup>18</sup>Byman (n 12).

<sup>19</sup>Financial Action Task Force, *Financing of the Terrorist Organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant* (FATF 2015).

<sup>20</sup>Financial Action Task Force, *Comprehensive Update on Terrorist Financing Risks* (FATF 2025)

<sup>21</sup>Byman (n 12).

Historically, organizations with stable access to finance, territorial sanctuary, and external patrons have tended to survive longer than isolated cells lacking institutional depth.

### **Case Study: The Israel–Hammas Conflict**

In the modern world, the Israel-Hamas conflict sheds light on the relationship between radicalization and sponsorship. Hamas uses a mix of nationalist, religious, and political beliefs to further radicalize its sympathizers and members. However, the group's ability to maintain coordinated and persistent violence cannot be explained by doctrine alone. The magnitude of the escalation following October 2023 shows how powerful groups can quickly translate ideology into military action.

According to Mara Revkin, contemporary terrorist groups frequently establish governance frameworks in addition to their armed activities. Similar traits are exhibited by Hamas, which serves as both a governing body and a violent organization in Gaza. Its capacity to mobilize resources and uphold territorial control is improved by this dual duty.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the current conflict, there were more than two million people living in Gaza, therefore governance systems offered substantial social and political clout.<sup>23</sup>

In this situation, sponsorship is essential. Hamas is able to continue operating only because of outsourced and external financial support, regional partnerships, and resource availability. This kind of assistance makes it easier to obtain weapons, train militants, and strategize attacks. The importance of tunnel economies, cross-border finance conduits, and external support in preserving military capabilities has been emphasized by numerous international evaluations.<sup>24</sup>

Governance systems also help groups become more resilient by allowing them to integrate into the local populace.<sup>25</sup>

From an analytical standpoint, this case study shows that radicalization is insufficient to explain why terrorism persists. While ideology may explain recruitment, it does not explain sustained operational capability. Sponsorship, which offers the institutional and material backing required for protracted warfare, helps to clarify this potential. This implies that counterterrorism tactics that only concentrate on deradicalization might not be able to address the underlying causes of violence.

### **Implications for Counterterrorism**

The relationship between radicalization and sponsorship has significant implications for counterterrorism policy. Christopher Baker-Beall mentions how contemporary counterterrorism strategies increasingly emphasize preparedness and response. However, these approaches often prioritize preventing radicalization while paying less attention to the structural factors that sustain terrorism. This creates a policy imbalance in which ideological

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<sup>22</sup>Mara R Revkin, 'When Terrorists Govern: Protecting Civilians in Conflicts with State-Building Armed Groups' (2018) 9 Harvard National Security Journal 100.

<sup>23</sup>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Occupied Palestinian Territory Situation Reports (OCHA 2024).

<sup>24</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, Hamas Financing and External Support (CFR 2024).

<sup>25</sup>World Bank, Population Estimates for Gaza Strip (World Bank 2023).

surveillance may expand while financial and logistical networks remain comparatively resilient.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Ann-Kathrin Rothermel highlights the growing complexity of global counterterrorism governance, which involves multiple institutions and policy frameworks. While this reflects an effort to address the multifaceted nature of terrorism, it also underscores the need for more integrated strategies.<sup>27</sup>

The United Nations counterterrorism architecture now involves numerous agencies and coordination bodies, reflecting the transnational nature of contemporary threats.<sup>28</sup>

In my view, effective counterterrorism must address both motivation and capability. Strategies that focus exclusively on ideological intervention risk overlooking the networks and resources that enable terrorist organizations to function. A more comprehensive approach would involve disrupting financial flows, limiting access to safe havens, and addressing the institutional environments that allow such groups to operate.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that radicalization alone does not adequately explain terrorism. Although it plays an integral role in determining motives for violence it does not account for the process that leads to sustained and structured use of force. Sponsorship is instead that which provides the mechanism through which this process is completed.

By providing essential resources, organizational structures, and operational capacity, sponsorship converts ideological intent into capability. The case study on Israel and Hamas demonstrates how, even in a contemporary context, strengthened structural support can sustain terrorist activities over time.

To conclude, terrorism should be understood as the result of an interaction between radicalization and sponsorship. Examining the aforementioned relationship allows for a comprehensive understanding of political violence, which points toward the need for counterterrorism strategies addressing both the motivations behind violence and the mechanisms that sustain it. It also demonstrates how durable security responses must focus on both extremist narratives, and on the structures that allow violence to endure.

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<sup>26</sup>Christopher Baker-Beall, Laura Miles, Natasha Leach and Estelle Reed, 'From Prevent to Protect and Prepare: The Manchester Arena Attack and Shifting Priorities in the United Kingdom's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST)' (2024) *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

<sup>27</sup>Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, 'From Differentiation to Nexus Governance: Dynamics of Change in the UN's Inter-Institutional Governance of Terrorism and Violent Extremism' (2025) 69 *International Studies Quarterly*.

<sup>28</sup>United Nations, UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (UNGA Res 60/288, 2006) and subsequent review resolutions.