

# Criminological Analysis of Terrorism

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## **Abstract**

*The article “Criminological Analysis of Terrorism” aims to examine the terrorist phenomenon from a criminological perspective, highlighting how classical and modern theories of criminology can explain the emergence, development and perpetuation of ideologically motivated violence. Terrorism is analyzed as a form of organized crime and as an extreme expression of social deviance, characterized by the systematic use of violence against civilians to achieve political, religious or ideological goals. The paper begins by conceptually delimiting terrorism, highlighting the terminological and political difficulties related to its definition, as well as its classification according to motivation and actor (state, religious, nationalist, extreme right or left terrorism). A review is made of the main relevant criminological theories – such as the theory of anomie, the theory of differential association or the theory of social control – which offer explanations regarding the motivation of terrorist actors and the social context of radicalization. The article focuses on the profile of the terrorist offender, contrary to the stereotypes that associate him with marginal or mentally unstable individuals. Studies show that many of the terrorists are educated people, with a deep ideological motivation and a strong group identification. The radicalization process is approached from a multidimensional perspective, analyzing its stages, psychosocial risk factors and the role of informal networks or the online environment in facilitating it. Regarding response measures, the analysis highlights the importance of a prevention framework that includes both social and educational interventions (primary prevention) and security and deradicalization policies (secondary and tertiary prevention). The comparative study between jihadist and far-right terrorism reveals similarities in radicalization mechanisms and ideological differences, providing a balanced picture of the plurality of contemporary terrorist threats. In conclusion, the article supports the need for an integrated*

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*approach, combining criminological explanations with effective institutional responses. Terrorism cannot be understood outside the social, political and cultural context, and its prevention requires inter-institutional, international collaboration and strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities.*

**Keywords:** *Terrorism; prevention; radicalization process; vulnerable.*

## 1. Introduction

Terrorism is one of the most complex and dangerous forms of contemporary crime, with major implications for national and international security, social cohesion and fundamental human rights (Corsei, Ștefănoaia, 2022). In recent decades, this phenomenon has experienced an alarming proliferation, adapting to new socio-political and technological contexts and transcending state borders, transforming itself into a transnational threat with an impact disproportionate to the resources used (Schmid, 2011, p. 39). Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but its modern expressions, especially those related to religious or ideological radicalization, as well as violent extremism of various orientations, require rigorous analysis from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Although studies on terrorism have traditionally been dominated by approaches from the fields of political science, security and international relations, the contributions of criminology are essential for understanding the behavioral, psychosocial and motivational dimensions of criminals involved in terrorist acts (Neagu, 2016, p. 201). Criminology, as the science of criminal behavior, offers a theoretical and methodological framework capable of explaining the process of radicalization, target selection, legitimization of violence, but also the possibilities of intervention and prevention of this type of crime. At the heart of this analysis are fundamental questions such as: what drives a person to resort to extreme violence in the name of an ideology? What are the risk factors that favor radicalization? What role does the social, economic and cultural environment play in the emergence of terrorism?

Defining terrorism remains a significant challenge, both theoretically and legally. There is no international consensus on a single definition, although most formulations include elements such as the deliberate use of violence against civilians, political or ideological goals and the intention to produce fear or intimidation (Hoffman, 2006,

p. 31). This conceptual ambiguity has been exploited by various regimes and actors to justify repressive measures or to delegitimize political opposition. From a criminological perspective, however, the emphasis is on deviant behavior and the context that favors the commission of the acts, regardless of the declared motivation of the terrorist actors.

An essential dimension in the criminological analysis of terrorism is the application of classical theories of crime. Thus, the theory of anomie (Merton, 1938, pp. 672–682) interprets terrorism as a response to tensions between promoted cultural goals and the legitimate means available to achieve them (Merton, 1938). In turn, the theory of differential association (Sutherland, 1947, p. 5) reveals how deviant behaviors are learned in groups that promote norms opposite to societal ones (Sutherland, 1947). Also, the theories of social control (Hirschi, 2002) and neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 2010) offer explanations regarding the weakening of attachment to social institutions or the moral justifications used by terrorists to commit violent acts.

In the context of globalization, the phenomenon of radicalization has acquired new valences, becoming an often-invisible process, accelerated by the online environment and social networks, which facilitate the dissemination of extremist ideologies and the recruitment of new members (Schmid, 2013, p. 10). Thus, there is a need to develop multidimensional public prevention policies, which include both security measures and educational, social and psychological interventions. In addition, deradicalization and social reintegration programs are becoming increasingly important within criminal and penitentiary policies, especially for young people or those in the early stages of radicalization (Schmid, 2013, p. 10).

This paper aims to investigate terrorism from a criminological perspective, systematically analyzing relevant explanatory theories, the profile of the terrorist offender, the psychosocial mechanisms of radicalization, as well as institutional responses to this phenomenon. Through this approach, we aim not only at a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon, but also at identifying concrete directions for intervention and prevention, in order to reduce the risks associated with contemporary terrorism.

## **2. Definition and typology of terrorism**

Despite the omnipresence of the term “terrorism” in public, political and academic discourse, the concept remains deeply ambiguous and contested. One of the major difficulties in the study of

terrorism is the lack of a universally accepted definition, both among specialists and international organizations. This lack of consensus is the result of a wide range of ideological motivations, tactics and goals associated with the phenomenon, but also of the political charge of the term, which is often used selectively, to delegitimize opponents or justify repressive measures (Jackson, Smyth, & Gunning, 2009, p. 7).

### *2.1 Defining Terrorism*

Existing definitions of terrorism vary depending on the perspective adopted: legal, political, sociological or criminological. In general, terrorism is understood as the intentional use of violence or the threat of violence against civilian targets, with the aim of causing terror and bringing about political or social change (Schmid, 2011, p. 39). In this sense, Bruce Hoffman defines terrorism as “the deliberate use of violence against non-combatant targets, with the aim of inducing fear in an audience wider than the one directly affected” (Hoffman, 2006, p. 31).

A criminologically relevant approach emphasizes the behavioral and social features of the terrorist act: its violent, planned, repetitive nature, ideological motivation, lack of remorse, but also the ability to instrumentalize fear to generate social or political reactions. Terrorism is frequently analyzed as a form of organized crime, although it is differentiated from it by its emphasis on symbolism, communication and psychological impact.

In legal terms, international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union or NATO have adopted functional definitions, which include elements such as: intimidation of the population, coercion of governments and endangerment of the constitutional order. For example, EU Directive 2017/541 on combating terrorism defines terrorist crimes as actions committed with the intention of seriously intimidating a population, coercing a government or seriously destabilizing the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country.

### *2.2 Typology of terrorism*

For a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, it is essential to classify the different forms of terrorism. The typologies proposed in the specialized literature take into account criteria such as: ideological motivation, actors involved, objectives pursued or method used.

*a) State terrorism*

State terrorism refers to the use of violence by a government against its own population or external groups, with the aim of consolidating power or eliminating opponents. Historical examples include repression during totalitarian regimes (Nazism, Stalinism) or the support of paramilitary groups by certain states (Chomsky, 2001, p. 45).

Although rarely defined as such in official discourse, state terrorism has a major relevance in criminological analysis, as it defies the logic of the rule of law and undermines social trust in institutions.

*b) Religious terrorism*

This is one of the most discussed forms of terrorism in the post-9/11 era, being associated with jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS or Boko Haram. Religious motivation is not new in the history of terrorism, but in its contemporary forms, it often involves an apocalyptic vision, an absolute legitimization of violence and a sharp polarization between “believers” and “non-believers” (Kepel, 2017, p. 29). Religious radicalization is frequently analyzed in criminology as a process of socialization into a closed ideology, which justifies violence in the name of a transcendent cause.

*c) Nationalist/separatist terrorism*

This type of terrorism is motivated by the desire of an ethnic or cultural group to achieve independence, autonomy, or a distinct political status. Classic examples include the activity of the IRA in Northern Ireland, ETA in the Basque Country, or the PKK in Turkey. Although often anchored in a historical context of marginalization, this type of terrorism is analyzed in criminology through the lens of the perceived legitimacy of the cause versus the illegality of the methods used (Crenshaw, 1995, pp. 473–512).

*d) Ideological terrorism (left or right)*

Extreme left-wing (e.g. Red Brigades, RAF) or extreme right-wing (e.g. lone bombers in Norway or the USA) groups often promote a utopian vision of society, which they try to impose through violence. In the current context, far-right terrorism is on the rise in Europe and the USA, being characterized by xenophobia, racism and violent opposition to minorities.

*e) Cyber terrorism (cyberterrorism)*

In a digitalized world, there is increasing discussion about the possibility of terrorist attacks carried out in virtual space, with the aim of disrupting critical systems (banks, energy, communications). Although concrete cases are limited to date, the destructive potential of this emerging form of terrorism is considerable.

### **3. Profile of the terrorist offender**

Understanding the profile of the terrorist offender is an essential step in the efforts to prevent, deradicalize and effectively combat terrorism. While in the case of common crime the profiling of the offender has a solid empirical basis, terrorism poses additional difficulties, as the actors involved vary significantly depending on the historical, cultural and ideological context, but also on the type of organization or movement to which they belong. However, studies in criminology, psychology and social sciences have identified a series of recurring features in the psycho-social structure of terrorists, as well as in their radicalization path.

#### ***3.1 General characteristics***

Contrary to stereotypes spread in the media, most terrorist offenders do not suffer from serious mental disorders and are not, traditionally, “crazy” or antisocial in the clinical sense. Studies have shown that they are often functional individuals with an average or above-average level of education, who radicalize in specific social contexts (Horgan, 2005, p. 51). Marc Sageman, analyzing data on over 400 jihadists, concluded that the vast majority were young, educated, came from the middle classes and showed a voluntary ideological involvement, not a co-optation by coercion.

On the other hand, radicalization is not a purely ideological process, but involves a complex interaction between individual factors (frustration, identity crisis, desire for belonging), contextual (marginalization, discrimination) and network (the influence of radical groups, online and offline) factors. This dynamic means that the profile of the terrorist cannot be reduced to a single typology, but rather to be understood as a continuum of motivations, vulnerabilities and personal choices.

#### ***3.2 Psychological and social factors***

At the individual level, terrorist offenders often manifest a strong need for meaning and a sense of perceived injustice, which makes them susceptible to radical ideologies that offer a clear worldview and a higher purpose (Kruglanski et al., 2009, pp. 331–357). Identity crisis is a key factor, especially among young second-generation immigrants in Western societies, who feel alienated from both their culture of origin and their adopted culture. Terrorist ideology functions here as a catalyst that provides belonging, legitimacy and moral justification for violence.

In addition, the radicalization process is often accelerated by membership in social networks, groups of friends or online forums that promote victimizing narratives and glorify martyrdom. Thus, not so much religious or political doctrine as such, but rather group dynamics play a decisive role in the formation of the terrorist offender. In many cases, radicalization is preceded by intense socialization within a radical cell or community, in which dominant norms and values are gradually replaced by those of the extremist group (Neumann, 2013).

### *3.3 Typologies of terrorists*

The specialized literature proposes several typologies depending on the degree of involvement and psychological profile:

- The ideological terrorist – motivated by deep convictions, perceives violent acts as a moral or religious mission. It is frequently found in jihadist or revolutionary movements.

- The adventurer/nihilist – often young, attracted to violence and action, less ideologically motivated, but easy to recruit by radical groups.

- The psychopathological – a minority, but relevant, includes individuals with mental disorders (paranoia, schizophrenia) who adopt terrorism as a means of expressing personal anger.

- The lone wolf – an individual radicalized outside an organization, but who commits terrorist acts inspired by extremist ideologies. It is difficult to identify preventively and often discovered only after the attack.

### *3.4 Criminal Profiling in Practice*

In applied criminology, terrorist offender profiling is used by intelligence and security services to anticipate and prevent terrorist acts. It involves behavioral analysis, background checks, online monitoring, and investigation of networks of influence. However, the usefulness of this method is limited by the dynamic and adaptable nature of contemporary terrorism, especially in the case of individual radicalization and lone attackers.

## **4. Mechanisms of Terrorism Radicalization**

Radicalization is the process by which an individual or group adopts an extremist ideology and becomes willing to use violent means to achieve political, religious, or social goals. Although not all forms of radicalization lead to terrorism, almost all terrorist acts are the result of a prior radicalization process. In recent decades, especially after the

attacks of September 11, 2001, academic and institutional interest in understanding the mechanisms of radicalization has grown exponentially, given the complexity of the phenomenon and its direct consequences on national and international security (Kundnani, 2015, p. 4).

#### *4.1 The multidimensional dimension of radicalization*

Radicalization is not a unidimensional phenomenon, but the result of a combination of individual, social, ideological and structural factors. At the individual level, experiences of social exclusion, stigmatization, discrimination or trauma can create a favorable terrain for the adoption of extremist views. These negative experiences are often reinterpreted through an ideological lens that explains the injustices suffered and offers an apparently legitimate path to revenge.

At the social level, radicalization is closely linked to the process of grouping and belonging to communities that share the same grievances or radical objectives. Studies have shown that individuals do not radicalize in isolation, but in networks of interaction, be they real or virtual. Radicalization is thus not only a psychological process, but also a social and communicational one.

The ideological dimension plays a central role. Radical ideologies function as mechanisms for reinterpreting reality and legitimizing violence. They offer a dualistic worldview (us vs. them), a victim narrative (our group is persecuted), but also a saving solution (struggle, martyrdom, revolt). In the case of jihadist groups, this ideology is often rooted in fundamentalist interpretations of religious texts, but can be adapted and modernized through online propaganda.

#### *4.2 Stages of the radicalization process*

The four-stage model proposed by Randy Borum provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the radicalization process:

- Perception of injustice – The individual identifies a form of oppression, marginalization or discrimination, real or perceived.
- Attribution of guilt – A collective “culprit” is identified (the state, the West, a religion, an ethnic group, etc.).
- Moral reinterpretation – An ideology or narrative is constructed that justifies revenge, violent resistance, including murder.
- Decision to act – Moving from ideological sympathy to active involvement, sometimes through terrorist acts.

These stages are not always linear or universal, but they describe a frequent pattern among violent radicals. An example is the

many young Westerners recruited by ISIS, who have taken this path in the context of hybrid identity, social frustration and the influence of radical social networks.

#### ***4.3 Factors favoring radicalization***

Among the most common factors favoring radicalization identified in the specialized literature are:

- Individual factors: existential crises, personality disorders, trauma, the need to belong.
- Socio-economic factors: poverty, social exclusion, lack of opportunities.
- Cultural and identity factors: ethnic discrimination, racism, Islamophobia.
- Social networks and group influence: friends, relatives or radical religious leaders who act as agents of radicalization.
- The online environment: forums, propaganda networks and encrypted channels used for recruitment and indoctrination.

These variables can combine differently from case to case, which is why prevention strategies must be personalized and adapted to the cultural and geopolitical context.

#### ***4.4 Radicalization in the digital space***

A major factor in the recent evolution of terrorism is the role of technology and the internet. Extremist propaganda is disseminated through videos, manifestos, blogs and social networks, facilitating the recruitment, indoctrination and even technical training of potential terrorists. Online radicalization is often faster and less visible than classic radicalization, which makes it difficult to detect vulnerable individuals early.

ISIS, for example, has used networks such as Telegram, Twitter or YouTube to create a digital ecosystem of ideological socialization and operational training. Such platforms allow the dissemination of emotional materials, images of martyrdom, motivational videos and even tutorials on bomb making. This type of radicalization is heavily publicized and intersects with other phenomena, such as disinformation and social polarization.

### **5. Preventing and combating terrorism**

Preventing and combating terrorism is an essential priority of national and international security policies, given the devastating impact that this phenomenon has on democratic societies, political

stability and the global economy. The complexity and dynamism of terrorist threats require an integrated, multidisciplinary approach, combining security measures, legislative instruments, social policies and coordinated international actions.

### *5.1 Preventing terrorism: dimensions and instruments*

Preventing terrorism involves early identification of risks, combating radicalization and eliminating the conditions conducive to violent extremism. Prevention strategies are built on two levels: primary (general prevention of radicalization in the population) and secondary (intervention on individuals or groups at high risk of radicalization).

In the European Union, the general framework for prevention is represented by the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism, which promotes measures such as: strengthening social cohesion, promoting inclusive education, training education and police staff to recognize signs of radicalization, and involving local communities in prevention activities.

An effective tool is monitoring and countering extremist propaganda online, where radicalization occurs rapidly and on a large scale. Platforms such as YouTube, Telegram and social networks are used to disseminate violent messages, recruit members and plan attacks (Merton, 1938, pp. 672–682). Collaboration between authorities, technology companies and civil society is essential to reduce access to such content.

### *5.2 Combating terrorism: operational and legislative actions*

Combating terrorism involves a set of coercive and operational measures aimed at preventing, detecting and neutralizing active threats. These measures include:

- Surveillance and monitoring of suspects, through technical and human means (informants, interceptions, international collaborations).
- Anti-terrorist operations carried out by specialized units (e.g. DIAS, GIGN, FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force).
- Criminalization of the preparation of terrorist acts, including participation in training, financing of terrorism and extremist propaganda (Sutherland, 1947, p. 5).
- International judicial and police cooperation, in particular through Europol, Interpol, Eurojust and information exchange networks such as SIS II or PNR.
- In terms of legislation, many states have adopted special anti-terrorism laws, designed to provide authorities with rapid and efficient

tools. For example, in Romania, Law no. 535/2004 on the prevention and fight against terrorism regulates the organization of the National System for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism (SNPCT), coordinated by the Romanian Intelligence Service.

- At the same time, combating the financing of terrorism is a priority area. The measures adopted include monitoring suspicious financial flows, freezing accounts, cooperating with banking institutions and imposing international sanctions in accordance with UN Resolutions.

### *5.3 Challenges in preventing and combating terrorism*

Although significant progress has been made, the fight against terrorism faces numerous challenges. One of these is the balance between security and respect for fundamental rights. Excessive use of surveillance measures or long-term preventive detention can generate social tensions and even fuel radical rhetoric.

Another obstacle is the transnational and decentralized nature of terrorist networks, which complicates investigation and discourages effective cooperation between states. In addition, new technologies, such as encryption of communications, deepfakes or cryptocurrency financing, complicate the monitoring of terrorist groups.

In this context, prevention must become proactive and adaptive, based on multidisciplinary research, the involvement of local communities and international partnerships. Deradicalization, the reintegration of former combatants and the promotion of community resilience are essential components of a sustainable strategy.

## **6. Conclusions**

Terrorism is one of the most complex and dynamic criminal phenomena of the 21st century, with profound legal, political, social and psychological implications. Criminological analysis of terrorism provides additional and necessary understanding by exploring the factors that determine extremist criminal behavior, the typologies of the actors involved and the mechanisms through which violent ideologies are transformed into concrete actions.

The criminological approach should not be confused with simple criminal investigation or geopolitical analysis; it aims to identify, in a scientific and interdisciplinary manner, the causes, patterns and manifestations of terrorism as a particular form of crime, in which violence is deliberately used to influence collective behavior, government decisions and power structures.

According to contemporary criminological paradigms, terrorism cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model. No single theory – be it psychological, sociological or political – can fully cover the complexity of the motivations and contexts that lead to terrorist acts. Instead, an ecological, systemic approach is needed, which takes into account individual factors (psychological, identity), social factors (radical groups, marginalization), but also macrostructural conditions (inequality, conflicts, geopolitical instability).

The criminology of terrorism is particularly concerned with the paths of radicalization, analyzing how ordinary people end up committing acts of extreme violence in the name of abstract causes. Studies have shown that radicalization is often a gradual process, based on the perception of injustice, social isolation, fractured identity and group influences. There is no single profile of the terrorist, but we can identify recurring features: ideological rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity, the need for meaning and belonging.

Based on these findings, the prevention and fight against terrorism must be based not only on repressive interventions (surveillance, detention, destruction of networks), but also on proactive policies, oriented towards education, social inclusion and the development of critical thinking. Deradicalization programs, although still in their infancy in many countries, represent a promising direction, especially when they are personalized and supported by psychologists, sociologists, religious leaders and former radicals.

It is also crucial to adapt the legislative framework to new forms of digital, decentralized and individualized terrorism. “Low-tech” terrorism (the use of simple means, such as vehicles or white weapons) and cyber terrorism are becoming increasingly common, requiring increased analysis and intervention capabilities from the authorities. In parallel, technology must be used as an ally in prevention – through artificial intelligence, predictive analysis, filtering of extremist online content, etc.

The criminological analysis of terrorism is a field in continuous expansion, closely linked to geopolitical, technological and cultural developments. Future research should focus on new forms of radicalization (e.g., in online games, on encrypted streaming platforms), but also on the intersections between terrorism and other phenomena – such as organized crime, illegal migration or cybercrime.

Another promising area is the psychological and social profiling of self-radicalized terrorists, often lacking direct affiliation to a known group, but influenced by violent ideologies and rhetoric. Equally,

methods of risk assessment and the effectiveness of deradicalization and reintegration programs need to be explored.

In conclusion, terrorism remains a major threat, but its criminological understanding paves the way for more refined, balanced and sustainable solutions. A safe world is not just a world protected from intrusions.

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