

Key Approaches in Radicalization Research: A Literature Review

Radikalleşme Araştırmalarında Temel Yaklaşımlar: Literatür Taraması

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Abstract: Radicalization has garnered substantial attention in global security studies and intellectual circles following the dissolution of the Cold War political structure. The concept gained global recognition following the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, as well as in European cities such as Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. This analytical paradigm has become widely recognized in the profession of interpreting political violence occurrences, especially in scholarly investigations on jihadist terrorism and the participation of Western "foreign fighters" in Syria and Iraq. The social sciences have increasingly focused on radicalization, particularly in relation to homegrown violent extremists. This discussion aims to understand the intricate processes by which seemingly ordinary individuals are drawn toward adopting terrorism. In this context, our study provides the practical foundations of the concept of radicalization within the broader framework of international security architecture and focuses on the key perspectives being discussed in the existing body of literature on radicalization.

Keywords: Radicalization, Terrorism, Political Violence, Moghadam, NYPD, Relational

Öz: Radikalleşme kavramı, özellikle Soğuk Savaş'ın güvenlik yapısının çözülmesinin ardından takip eden yıllarda, küresel güvenlik çalışmaları ve entelektüel çevrelerde büyük ilgi görmüştür. Bu kavram, 11 Eylül 2001'de ve 2004'te Madrid ve 2005'te Londra gibi Avrupa kentlerinde meydana gelen terör eylemlerinin ardından küresel çapta tanınırlık kazandı. Bu analitik paradigma, siyasi şiddet olaylarını yorumlama pratiğinde, özellikle de cihatçı terörizm ve Batılı "yabancı savaşçıların" Suriye ve Irak'a katılımı üzerine yapılan akademik araştırmalarda yaygın olarak kabul görmüştür. Sosyal bilim alanları, özellikle yerli şiddet yanlıları ile bağlantılı olarak radikalleşme konusuna giderek daha fazla odaklanmakta ve görünüşte sıradan olan bireylerin terörizmi benimsemeye doğru çekildiği karmaşık süreçleri anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışmamız radikalleşme kavramının uluslararası güvenlik mimarisinin daha geniş bağlamı içerisindeki pratik

temellerine yer vermekte ve radikalleşme literatüründe tartışılan başlıca yaklaşımları konu edinmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Radikalleşme, Siyasal Şiddet, Terörizm, Moghadam, NYPD, İlişkisel*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of radicalization has attracted significant attention within global security studies and intellectual circles since the disintegration of the political framework known as the Cold War. The concept has garnered global recognition subsequent to the acts of terrorism that occurred on September 11, 2001, in various European metropolises, namely Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. Subsequently, this analytical paradigm has gained widespread prominence in the realm of interpreting and elucidating occurrences of political violence, particularly in the domain of scholarly investigations pertaining to jihadist terrorism and the involvement of Western "foreign fighters" in the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq. Moreover, the social sciences have progressively directed their attention towards the phenomenon of radicalization, specifically in connection with the discourse pertaining to locally grown violent extremists. This intellectual discussion has endeavored to comprehend the complex mechanisms through which seemingly ordinary individuals become inclined toward the adoption of terrorism.

This approach has been instrumental in the creation of counterterrorism strategies that incorporate preventative measures focused on combating extremism. These measures are primarily targeted at addressing extremism at the individual, group, and mass levels. Furthermore, extensive research has been carried out by scholars to examine the effects of radicalization and extremism on communities. These studies also explore various approaches that policymakers and other stakeholders can employ to prevent or effectively tackle these issues. However, it has been argued by scholars that anti-terrorism measures that prioritize military and law enforcement operations could potentially have negative consequences and might even worsen the process of radicalization. On the contrary, some individuals advocate for a more extensive strategy that addresses the root causes of radicalization and extremism, including grievances related to politics, society, and the economy.

Following the events of September 11 and the subsequent rise of "homegrown" terrorism in Western nations, there has been a growing perception that "Islamist terrorism" is no longer solely an external threat. The terminology represented a significant change regarding the way we comprehend the search for the root causes of terrorism and the

creation and implementation of innovative methods and resources to effectively combat it. Research on radicalization has expanded due to the redefining of political violence, with a particular focus on terrorism.

Radicalization phenomenon has been studied using a variety of theoretical frameworks and empirical methods, such as:

- i. The process of radicalization can be explained through the lens of the psychological paradigm, which places emphasis on individual-level factors such as cognitive mechanisms, social identities, and personal grievances (Moghadam, 2005).
- ii. The sociological perspectives examine the ways in which social networks, group dynamics, and socialization processes play a role in the process of radicalization (Borum, 2011).
- iii. The third category of analysis pertains to political approaches, which involve an examination of the impact of state repression, global conflicts, and political grievances on the process of radicalization.
- iv. The economic approaches entail an investigation into the correlation between radicalization and economic factors such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment.
- v. Multidisciplinary approaches involve the integration of knowledge from diverse fields, such as psychology, sociology, political science, and economics, to enhance the comprehension of the radicalization process.

2. Radicalization: An Analytical Paradigm

The radicalization phenomenon is a much-debated concept in security and academic circles. It is perceived in many different ways and in different contexts (Crenshaw, 2014) and it has been used in a vague and ill-defined manner (Schimid, 2013). The term 'radicalization' has become one of the most popular phenomena in political violence literature since the 9/11 and terror attacks in Madrid and London, respectively (Neumann, 2013). The concept has been defined by various entities, including governments, international agencies, and academic circles, with a multitude of definitions available. Currently, there is no universally accepted definition in place up to date, and reaching a consensus on this matter continues to be challenging. Political violence experts generally acknowledge that there is no standard description for radicalization, as it is a complex and multifaceted process (Schmid, 2013).

The term “radical” is highly problematic and context-dependent, and its definition depends on what is “normal,” “moderate,” or “mainstream,” which has considerably changed over time. From a historical perspective, the word “radical” referred to movements, groups, or parties promoting democratic values and an institution primarily through nonviolent means. According to Neuman, the concept of radicalization is not a myth but rather has an ambiguous meaning. This ambiguity is the root cause of various controversies and debates surrounding the topic. He further states that the primary division lies in the conceptual understanding of radicalization, specifically between two perspectives: One that emphasizes extremist beliefs (referred to as cognitive radicalization) and another that prioritizes extremist behavior (known as behavioral radicalization) (Neuman). Stefan Malthaner pointed out three intersecting conceptual fault lines concerning radicalization: the first one is related to the differentiation between the radicalization of beliefs and the radicalization of behavior. In particular, the term “radicalization” has been related to the adaptation of extremist views or mindsets, resulting in violent behavior (Malthaner). Some have argued, however, that violent actions are not necessarily associated with radical ideas and beliefs. It has been suggested that individuals who hold extreme beliefs may not necessarily resort to acts of terrorism, and some individuals who commit acts of terrorism may not follow a traditional path of radicalization despite being deeply committed to an ideological cause (Borum, 2012). The adaptation of radical beliefs is linked to activism within extreme environments or milieus (Bjorgo and Horgan, 2009). The second point pertains to the various types of actors and levels of analysis, including individual, group/movement, and mass levels, as well as the opposing sides involved in a conflict, such as oppositional movements and state actors. The latter refers to the processual dimension of radicalization, which could manifest and exert its impact in a different episode of violence, such as inter-group conflict or radicalization within the framework of social movements and escalating protests (Malthener, 2017).

3. A Literature Review on Radicalization

According to the theoretical framework posited by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, the concept of group identification has the potential to engender intergroup strife, as it highlights the way in which individuals formulate their self-concept through their association with particular groups. The development of radicalization is a result of an individual's perception of self-becoming closely intertwined with a radical movement or ideology, thus may giving rise to extremist beliefs and actions (Jost and Sidanius, 2004). In his article “Four Waves of Modern Terrorism,” David C. Rapoport proposed the concept of “waves” of terrorist activity (Rapoport, 2004). According to Rapoport's assertion, the

identification of periods characterized by terrorism can be attributed to the prevalence of a common ideology, strategy, and mentality among its participants. Usually, every wave begins with a triggering incident and persists for a period of around thirty years or longer. He maintains that the phenomenon of terrorism becoming transnational in nature is attributable to the proliferation of terrorist entities beyond their domestic boundaries, coupled with the establishment of international alliances among like-minded groups of people (Chiangi, 2021). The global impact of terrorism has intensified due to the facilitation of the cross-border distribution of ideologies, tactics, and resources (Chiangi, 2021).

The perspective of the psychology-based approach is a commonly adopted approach to the scholarly investigation of radicalization. Moghaddam's "Staircase to Terrorism" model presents a distinct perspective on radicalization. This model classifies the process of radicalization into six distinct levels, or floors, each representing a unique state of mind experienced by the individual. Stated differently, the aforementioned model delineates a lucid methodology comprising six successive stages that demonstrate discrete psychological facets. They are as follows:

- a) "physical interpretation of material conditions,
- b) perceived options to fight unfair treatment,
- c) displacement of aggression,
- d) moral engagement,
- e) solidification of categorical thinking and the perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organization and the terrorist act and sidestepping inhibitory mechanisms" (Moghaddam, 2009).

The theoretical framework posits that individuals may go up and down the staircase of radicalization due to a multitude of factors, such as individual life events and exposure to extremist indoctrination (Moghaddam, 2009). Each of these sequential actions results in the perpetration of an act of terrorism. The staircase analogy posits that with each successive step, an individual progressively distances themselves from conventional societal norms, leading to an increased propensity to rationalize and partake in acts of terrorism (Lygre, Eid, J., Larsson and Ranstorp, 2011). The staircase model proposes a stratified framework comprising an initial stage and five subsequent tiers, with each tier signifying a unique behavioral phase that either advances or hinders an individual's trajectory toward terrorism. The proposed model posits that the progression toward terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves intricate interactions between psychological variables, societal contextual factors, and individual decision-making

processes. These elements collectively contribute to shaping an individual's trajectory toward involvement in terrorist activities (Moghaddam, 2005).

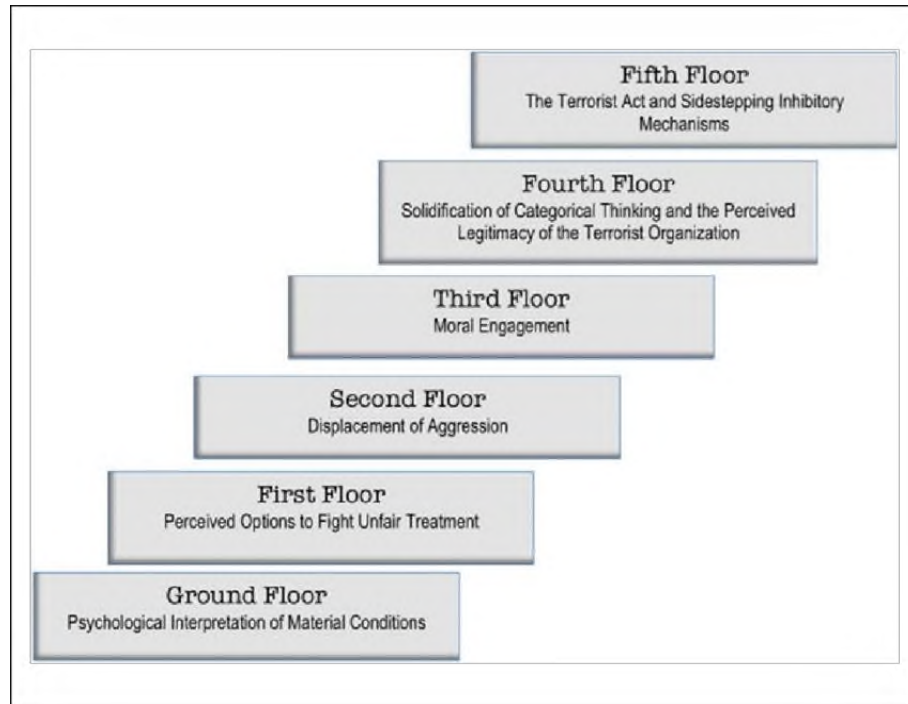


Figure 1. Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism

Marc Sageman posits that the decision to engage in violent behavior is a collective project, and radicalization is a collective event that takes place when individuals affiliate with a faction that espouses extremist beliefs (Sageman, 2004). Although there is no universally accepted definition of “radicalization,” the majority of scholars agree that it entails an intellectual transformation that results in a willingness to use violence to further political or religious objectives.

As per the theoretical framework posited by McCauley and Moskaleiko, the phenomenon of radicalization is subject to the influence of two discrete factors, specifically those pertaining to social and psychological areas. Theoretical in nature, the social pyramid explores the complicated interplay between group dynamics and social identity, ultimately shaping an individual's inclination towards extremist organizations. The emergence of this phenomenon can be attributed to a multitude of factors, encompassing social networks, peer pressure, and a collective affiliation with a faction that espouses a particular ideology (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2011).

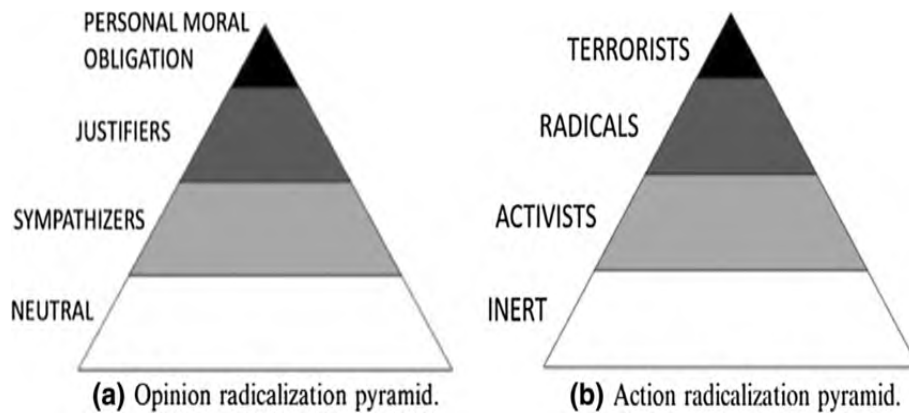


Figure 2. Two pyramid model (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011)

The psychological pyramid model investigates the way in which individual beliefs and predispositions can potentially result in radicalization. The phenomenon may manifest as a result of various factors, including but not limited to a perceived sense of injustice or grievance, a yearning for purpose or significance, and a longing for retaliation or retribution (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2020). Furthermore, the authors highlighted radicalization mechanisms at three levels: individual, group, and mass society (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011). At the individual level, they identified six mechanisms of political radicalization in that individuals are considered primarily responsible for their actions. Individual motivations such as personal and group grievances and hatred in search of status, glory, love, and fame were given significant attention in contrast to environmental factors or social influences. Members of a group who view themselves as interdependent are experiencing group-level dynamics, whereby the actions of one member of the group have an impact on the other members as well. The phenomenon of mass radicalization is intricately linked to occurrences, episodes, or communiqués that possess considerable import for their respective audiences on a domestic or global scale. The majority of extremist organizations rely on such a basis for intelligence, financial backing, logistical assistance, and new recruits. It is of utmost significance to acknowledge that these mechanisms do not function in isolation, nor do they exist autonomously. Numerous mechanisms exhibit interdependent interactions and mutual reinforcement (Futrell, Simi, and Tan, 2018).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York, the New York Police Department (NYPD) has put forth a novel approach to tackling radicalization. The conceptual framework known as the NYPD Model of Jihadization clarifies the process by which individuals undergo radicalization towards extremist ideologies, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of jihadist extremism. The current model has been developed with

the objective of aiding law enforcement personnel in comprehending the phenomenon of jihadization and potentially detecting individuals who may be advancing through these stages (Klausen, Campion, Needle, Giang & Libretti, 2016).

The NYPD Model of Jihadization delineates four distinct stages that an individual may undergo during the radicalization process (Dahl, 2014):

1. Pre-Radicalization: The preliminary phase precedes the onset of an individual's radicalization process.
2. Self-Identification: In this particular phase, the individual undertakes a thorough examination of extremist ideologies, which personal or societal factors may instigate.
3. Indoctrination: The individual has wholeheartedly embraced the extremist ideology and recognizes the moral obligation to conduct oneself in alignment with its principles.
4. Jihadization: In the ultimate stage, the individual recognizes their individual accountability to advocate for the cause, which may culminate in the development or execution of a terrorist endeavor (Dahl, 2014).

The proposed model posits a linear progression of stages; however, it is imperative to acknowledge that the factual process may exhibit a significantly greater degree of complexity. Moreover, there is no guarantee that every individual will experience all the stages (Torres, 2013).

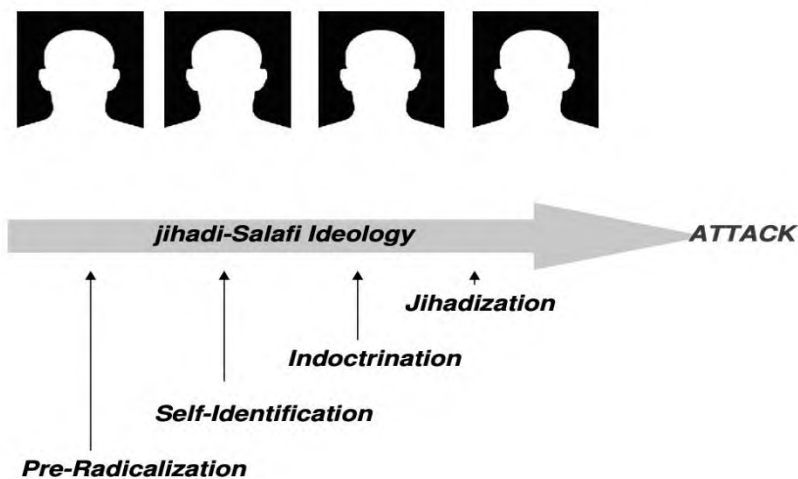


Figure 3. The NYPD's proposed four-stage radicalization process (NYPD)

Borum's model of the terrorist mindset offers a valuable framework for comprehending the psychological progression that individuals may undergo as they transition from perceiving injustices to perpetrating acts of terrorism. This model delineates four distinct stages that individuals could potentially pass through (Borum, 2004). The radicalization process, according to Randy Borum's model, consists of four stages:

1. **Grievance:** The radicalization process often begins with an individual's or group's perception of injustice or injury. The subject matter being contemplated may arise from factors pertaining to societal, financial, governmental, or an amalgamation of these elements. The persistent perception of being the victim of mistreatment, whether on a personal or collective level, continues to exist within the psychological makeup of the individual.
2. **Injustice:** The second stage is the identification of the grievance as an injustice. This includes the belief that the grievance is not only unjust but also immoral, which exacerbates anger and resentment.
3. **Target Attribution:** At this point, the aggrieved party places blame on a particular organization or person for the problems they've encountered up to this point. In turn, they direct their hatred and hostility toward this community.
4. **Distancing:** The ultimate phase entails creating a psychological and emotional separation from the focal group and diminishing their significance. This phase frequently involves the act of dehumanizing the targeted group, thereby rendering the notion of perpetrating violence against them more acceptable (Borum, 2011).

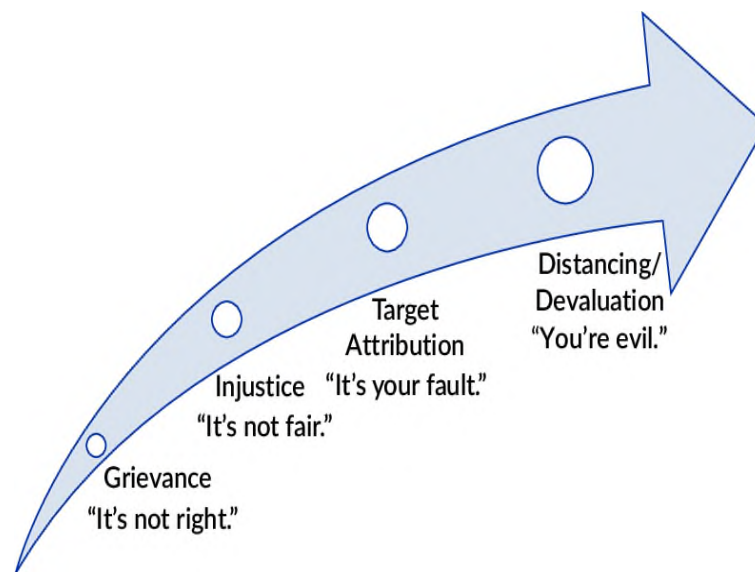


Figure 4. Borum's four-stage model of the terrorist mindset

The model developed by Borum was intended to provide law enforcement personnel with an understanding of the process of radicalization. The primary theoretical foundation of the model aimed to illustrate the process by which grievances can be transformed into animosity towards a specific group, culminating in violent behavior.

Quintan Wiktorowicz has proposed an alternative framework for investigating and comprehending the psychological mechanisms that underlie radicalization. His methodology stands out for its emphasis on the concept of "cognitive opening" and the extensive ethnographic research into al-Muhajiroun (King and Taylor, 2011). His work gives significant emphasis on the notion of radicalization as a form of resocialization. This refers to the point or stage in an individual's life at which they are receptive to new ideas and perspectives, particularly those that are distinct from prevalent or orthodox ones. This pertains to the process by which individuals who are new to a radical group are integrated into the group and their identities are reconfigured accordingly. It is the moment when an individual faces discrimination, socioeconomic crisis, and political repression, as they may experience a critical moment where they begin to question their beliefs and struggle to make sense of their experiences. This can leave them vulnerable to radicalized ideologies. A variety of factors, such as personal crises, social discontentment, or other significant life events, can trigger the activation of cognitive receptivity. Individuals may become vulnerable to the influence of radical ideologies during this time as they seek solutions that are not readily available within the constraints of the traditional structure (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

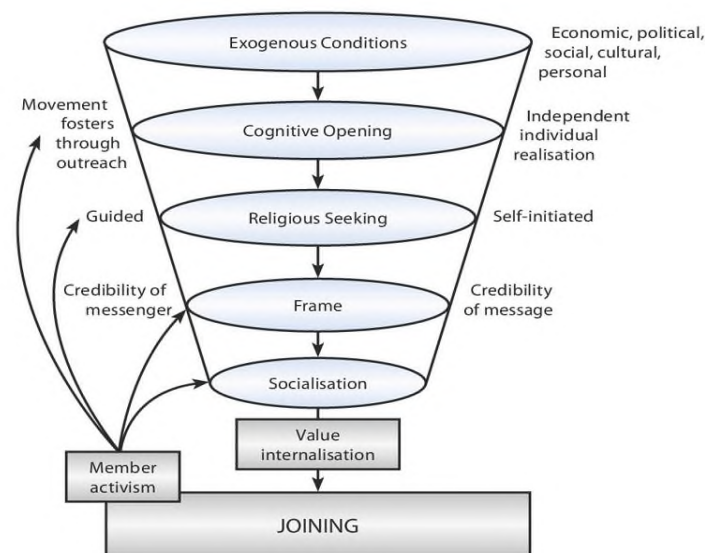


Figure 5. Wiktorowicz's Model of Radicalization

The expert group on violent radicalization by the European Commission defined radicalization as “a context-bound phenomenon and a socialization to extremism that manifest itself in terrorism” (Schmid, 2013). The definition of radicalization, as posited by the expert group, highlights its dynamic nature, characterized by a continuous process that can take place over an extended period of time. Moreover, it points out the correlation between radicalization and terrorism, which is perceived as the most consequential and deadly consequence of extremist beliefs. Furthermore, it highlights the imperative for effective strategies to tackle the underlying factors of violent extremism and terrorism.

It goes without saying that in recent years, studies on online radicalization have also increased their weight within the scope of radicalization studies. An increasing amount of attention has been paid in recent years to how the internet and social media contribute to radicalization and extremism. For instance, some researchers, like J.M. Berger, Bill Strathearn, and Peter Neumann, have suggested that social media sites like Twitter and Facebook play an increasingly important role as channels for extremists to spread their message and coordinate their activities. They suggested that the internet has become an increasingly important platform through which extremist organizations may spread their message and attract new members (Berger and Strathearn, 2013). The extent to which the internet and social media are responsible for radicalization and whether they represent a new kind of extremism, however, is still up for debate (Bekker and Beatrice, 2014).

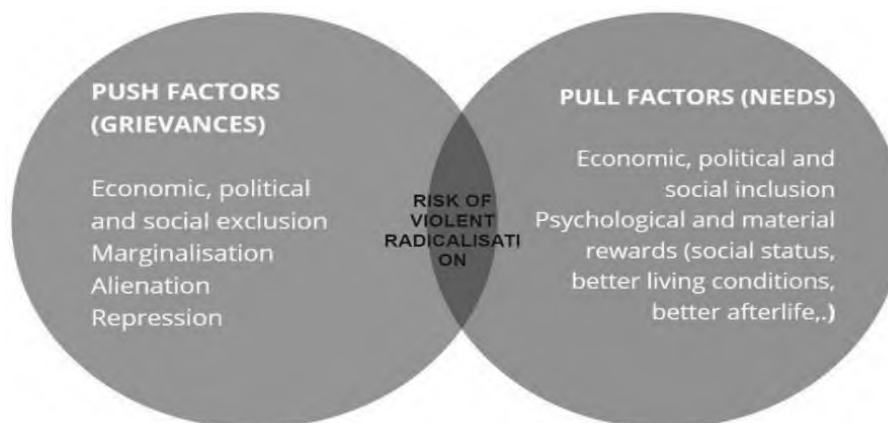


Figure 6. The push and pull factors of violent radicalization in North Africa (Bourekba, Moussa, 2021)

Drivers of violent extremism are varied and interrelated with economic, ideological, social, historical, and cultural dimensions. They engage and affect societies, groups, and

individuals at local, national, regional, and international levels (UNDP, 2023). What usually drives people into violent extremism is categorized as structural “push” factors and “pull” factors. Push factors are typically rooted in socioeconomic, political, and cultural causes, for instance, marginalization and fragmentation, government repression, human rights violations, ungoverned areas, endemic corruption, or cultural threat perceptions (Counter-Terrorism Module 2 Key Issues, nd). Whereas pull factors are associated with personal rewards with membership in a group or movement, participation in its activities may confer such as access to material resources, social status, and peers’ respect. A sense of belonging, adventure, and a sense of glory, and fame (CT Module 2 Key Issues, nd).

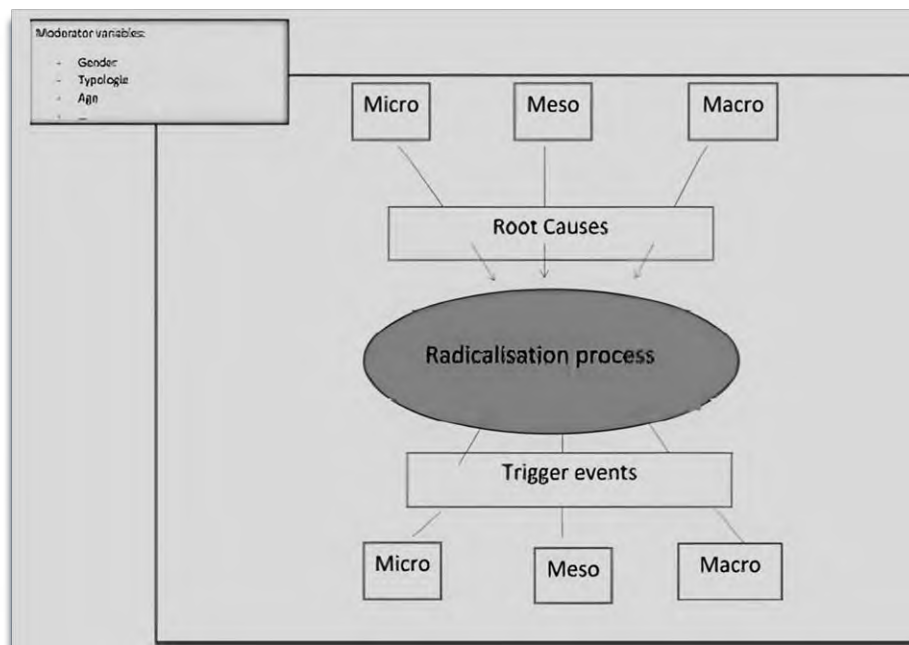


Figure 7. Multilevel Model of Radicalization (Moccia, 2019)

The radicalization process of an individual is influenced by underlying factors that endure for an extended period, while trigger events are specific occurrences that may function as catalysts for radicalization. The preconditions commonly referred to as ‘root causes’ are frequently cited as such in the scholarly discourse on radicalization. The radicalization process is contingent upon a confluence of these factors. Nevertheless, the process of radicalization is not instantaneous and typically involves a series of events or incidents. The analytical observation of movements’ radicalization processes necessitates the occurrence of events that are characterized by broken negotiations,

scattered attacks, and violent rituals. The literature review undertaken on behalf of the European Commission on Radicalization aimed to identify trigger events at different levels, encompassing micro-trigger events such as the loss of a loved one, changes in employment, and divorce, along with meso-trigger events such as recruitment. The review also examined the role of trigger events such as military actions, arrests of specific individuals, and attacks on the group (Moccia, 2019).

In addition to the models above, the relational approach is one of the prominent approaches in the radicalization literature. This approach suggests that the phenomenon of radicalization may occur as a result of interactions between social groups or movements. It is also referred to as the interactionist perspective in the literature. For Sidney Tarrow et al., the concept refers to “the expansion of collective action frames to more extreme agendas and the adoption of more transgressive forms of contention” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2008). Furthermore, as per Della Porta, radicalization “is a process of escalation from nonviolent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of interactions unfolding over time” (Della Porta, 2018). A similar explanation proposed by Alimi et al. suggests that “it is the process through which a social movement organization (SMO) shifts from predominantly nonviolent tactics of contention to tactics that include violent means, as well as the subsequent process of contention maintaining and possibly intensifying the newly introduced violence” (Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi, 2015). The term “Contentious Politics” as referred to by Sidney Tarrow et al., denotes “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when:

- a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, and
- b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants or objects of claims” (Snow, Della Porta, Klandermans, and McAdam, 2013).

Roughly translated, the definition refers to collective political struggle (Tarrow, 2013). In a less technical language, it involves claim-making actions which directly have some impact on other actor’s interests, including governments, non-state actors, or/and international actors, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs that is Collective Action, in which governments are involved as targets (Tilly, 2007). Our understanding of a Social Movement encompasses a comprehensive definition, which refers to a deliberate and organized group action aimed at advocating for significant transformations in the political or economic structures of society. Social movements are characterized by prolonged and coordinated efforts undertaken by

groups that advocate for a particular type of social transformation (Olzak, 2004). From the resource mobilization standpoint, it means a set of preferences for social change within a population, (Edwards and Gilliam, 2013) or, in other words, it refers to people who, at a given point in time, are not making contentious claims and start to do so (Tarrow and Tilly, 2015).

4. Conclusion

Radicalization has emerged as a significant subject of discourse and scholarly investigation within the realm of global security studies. The September 11, 2001, attacks and subsequent acts of terrorism in Europe have highlighted the intricate processes by which individuals are drawn towards embracing terrorism. This has resulted in the formulation of counterterrorism strategies that seek to prevent and combat extremism across different levels. There is a current debate about the most effective approach to counter radicalization. Some argue for addressing the root causes or taking into account the relational environment in which social movement operates, while others emphasize military and law enforcement operations. Moreover, there has been a paradigm shift in the perception of terrorism, recognizing it not only as an external threat but also as a direct result of domestic radicalization. Additional research and analysis are required to gain a deeper understanding of radicalization and its impact on global security.

However, it is imperative to emphasize that the process of radicalization does not inevitably lead to acts of violence. However, in instances where it occurs, the outcome is that of a violent extremist. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction made between intentions and values justifying political violence and the actual engagement in political violence. Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists—even those who lay claim to a “cause”—are not profoundly ideological and may not “radicalize” in any traditional sense (Borum, 2011). Therefore, we locate our analysis on this explicit and consistent distinction between the two attitudes and state that radicalization occurs at different stages. They are classified as micro or individual, collective (groups or movements), and mass levels of analysis. Individual pathways toward militant activism have been a particular concern for scholars studying political violence and terrorism (Malthener, 2014). Proponents of this level emphasize the psychological or social “pathologies” of individuals as the sole driver of radicalization. For them, political violence results from a state of madness or the innate predispositions of an individual. This line of argument is challenged by those who emphasize the role of social ties, radical networks, and milieus as “micro mobilization settings (Malthener, 2014). There are also group movements and mass radicalization levels of explanations.

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