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1 Introduction

The Hofstadgroup – Islamist terrorism in the Netherlands

On 2 November 2004, Dutch filmmaker and publicist Theo van Gogh was shot and stabbed to death in broad daylight while cycling through Amsterdam. Shortly after 9 am, a twenty-six-year-old man approached Van Gogh, emptied a 9 mm pistol at him and then attempted to sever his head as he lay dead or dying on the sidewalk. Without fully accomplishing this task, the assailant stuck his knife in Van Gogh's chest. He also left behind a note in which he threatened Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali by stabbing it onto his victim's body with a second blade. The attacker then calmly reloaded the magazine of his firearm and walked towards a nearby park, where a shootout with police officers ensued. Several minutes later he was taken into custody after suffering a bullet wound to the leg. As he was taken away, a policeman told him he was lucky to be alive. Van Gogh's murderer replied that he did not agree; he had intended to die during the firefight.¹

Van Gogh's assailant was no stranger to the Dutch police or the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). Since the fall of 2003, both organizations had come across this individual during their investigations into a group of young Dutch Muslims believed to be involved in terrorist activities. Because some of them lived and met each other in The Hague, a city also known in Dutch as the *Hofstad* (Court city), the AIVD began referring to these individuals as the 'Hofstadgroup' from October 2003 onward.² The name has stuck, even though the group's alleged members did not use it themselves.³ Until the day of the murder, however, the AIVD had not estimated that Van Gogh's assailant was preparing a violent crime. In fact, it had regarded him as a peripheral member of the group.⁴ Moving swiftly on information provided by the AIVD after the attack on Van Gogh, the police arrested the other individuals thought to be part of this terrorist organization.⁵ Although most suspects were apprehended without incident, two resisted violently.

1 Donner and Remkes, 'Kamerstukken 2, 2004-2005, 29854, Nr. 1', 1-2; Van Straelen, 'Requisitoir in De Strafzaak Tegen Mohammed B.', 10-27.

2 Donner and Remkes, 'Kamerstukken 2, 2004-2005, 29854, Nr. 3', 3, 5.

3 Groen and Kranenberg, *Women Warriors*, 48-49.

4 Commissie van Toezicht betreffende de Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdiensten, 'Toezichtsrapport Met Betrekking Tot Mohammed B.', 2, 17.

5 Police Investigator 1, 'Personal Interview 6', 4.

In the early hours of 11 November, a police arrest squad approached an apartment in The Hague where two suspects were staying. After making their presence known, the officers rammed the door only to find that it had been barricaded. Within moments, one of the occupants responded by throwing a hand grenade through the slender crack between door and door frame and was in turn shot at by the police. Both bullets missed their mark, but the grenade exploded on the street where it injured five policemen, one of whom seriously. Throughout the day that followed, the two suspects called for the police to come and get them and threatened to blow up the house. The standoff ended late in the afternoon when both individuals were induced to surrender after one of them had been shot in the shoulder by members of a military special forces unit. At the time of their arrest, both suspects were carrying additional hand grenades.⁶

It was quickly apparent that both Van Gogh's murderer and the hand-grenade wielding individuals adhered to an extremist interpretation of Islam. The note that the murderer left on Van Gogh's body and the will he had carried with him, titled 'Baptized in Blood', left little doubt that the attack had been inspired by his beliefs and that the perpetrator had hoped to die as a martyr for his cause.⁷ The two suspects in The Hague hastily wrote a will during the 'siege' of their apartment that similarly set out their wish to die fighting for Allah. Because their apartment had been wired by the AIVD, there are records of the various phone calls they made to friends and relatives announcing their imminent martyrdom.⁸ In fact, almost all of the other people arrested in connection with the Van Gogh killing were to a greater or lesser extent found in possession of documents, audiotapes, videos, and Internet materials espousing radical and extremist views of Islam and glorifying terrorism.⁹

These signs of an extremist ideology and the gruesome nature of Van Gogh's death, led the events of November 2004 to have an impact on Dutch society and politics that is felt to this day.¹⁰ They fueled an already heated

6 Dienst Nationale Recherche, 'RL8026', 01/13: 95-96; AHA07/24: 3087-127; AGV01/62: 17969-8005; GET: 8235-8237; The Hague Court of Appeal, 'LJN BC2576', 26-29; De Weger, 'Continuïteit En Verandering', 630.

7 Peters, 'De Ideologische En Religieuze Ontwikkeling', 18; appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 46-47; Dienst Nationale Recherche, 'RL8026', 01/01: 65.

8 Dienst Nationale Recherche, 'RL8026', AHA07/24: 3088-91, 3093-103, 3107, 3124; AHB01/25: 139-142; GET: 18235-37.

9 Ibid., 01/01: 131, 134, 142-47, 160-61, 171-72; 01/13: 47.

10 De Koning and Meijer, 'Going All the Way', 221; 'T Sas and Born, 'Hoofdofficier: Mohammed Bouyeri Handelde Niet Alleen'.

debate about multiculturalism and the integration of Muslim minorities.¹¹ But instead of being seen as a purely domestic affair, the Hofstadgroup was quickly interpreted within the context of the global 'jihadist' terrorist threat that had manifested itself with the 9/11 attacks on the United States orchestrated by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization.¹² More specifically, Van Gogh's assassin, his associates and the apparent 2005 attempts by some of the Hofstadgroup's remnants to plot additional attacks, came to be viewed as prime examples of the rise of a new 'homegrown' dimension of jihadist terrorism in Europe.¹³

Homegrown jihadist terrorism first appeared in Europe in March 2004, when bombs exploded on commuter trains in Madrid, killing 191 people and injuring 1500.¹⁴ Almost a year and a half later, suicide bombers targeted London's public transportation system, causing the deaths of 52 victims.¹⁵ What the attacks in Madrid, Amsterdam, and London had in common was that they were carried out by Islamist terrorists who lived, worked, and, albeit to varying degrees, belonged to the countries they attacked. The perpetrators of the Madrid attacks were largely first-generation immigrants; many of those involved in the Amsterdam and London attacks had been born and raised there.¹⁶ Whereas previously jihadist terrorism had emanated from places like Afghanistan, the tragedies in Madrid, Amsterdam, and London revealed dangers much closer to home.

1.1 Studying involvement in European homegrown jihadism

More than a decade after Van Gogh's murder, jihadist terrorism continues to pose a threat to European societies.¹⁷ In 2011, American forces completed their withdrawal from Iraq while neighboring Syria fell into civil war. These events created opportunities for al-Qaeda and its affiliates, but especially

11 Buijs and Demant, 'Extremisme En Radicalisering', 170-71.

12 'Spanje Ziet Band Met Nederland'; Coolsaet, 'EU Counterterrorism Strategy', 867-69; De Graaf and Eijkman, 'Terrorismebestrijding En Securitisering', 33; General Intelligence and Security Service, 'From Dawa to Jihad: The Various Threats from Radical Islam to the Democratic Legal Order', 5.

13 Sageman, 'The Next Generation of Terror', 37-39; General Intelligence and Security Service, 'Violent Jihad in the Netherlands', 29; Kirby, 'The London Bombers', 415.

14 Rose, Murphy, and Abrahms, 'Does Terrorism Ever Work?', 186.

15 Silke, 'Holy Warriors', 99.

16 Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 314, 333, 394, 397-405.

17 EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2014*, 21-22; Nesser, 'Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat', 440-56.

for the so-called 'Islamic State', to make considerable gains in both countries. Thousands of European men and women have joined these groups as 'foreign fighters'.¹⁸ The risk that battle-hardened, paramilitary trained, and ideologically extremist returnees will commit attacks in their countries of origin has become a prime concern for European authorities.¹⁹ In addition, there is the threat posed by extremists who chose to stay at home and by the relatively large, and apparently growing, circle of radical and extremist sympathizers that surround this militant core.²⁰ Given this context, it is clear that research on (homegrown) jihadist terrorism in Europe continues to be relevant not just for academics, but also for those working to prevent attacks and reduce societal polarization.²¹

Using an in-depth case study, this book asks how and why people become involved in European homegrown jihadist groups. As Sageman lamented in 2014, it is a question we are still unable to conclusively answer.²² For a topic as academically and societal relevant as terrorism this is a surprising state of affairs. After the 9/11 attacks, considerable new sources of funding became available and a large number of new researchers began studying terrorism, which led to a tremendous increase in research output.²³ Why is a comprehensive understanding of what drives people to participate in this particular form of political violence still so far off?

The slow progress towards understanding how and why involvement in terrorism occurs is in fact not so surprising. 'Terrorism' continues to lack a commonly accepted definition, frustrating comparative research and theoretical development.²⁴ The diversity in terms of terrorists' goals, means, organizational structures, and guiding ideologies imply that factors relevant to involvement in one typology of terrorism might be less salient in others.²⁵ Crucially, while there are almost fifty separate hypotheses about how and why involvement in terrorism occurs, most of them lack

18 General Intelligence and Security Service, 'The Transformation of Jihadism', 5; Neumann, 'Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq'.

19 Vidino, 'European Foreign Fighters', 217-19.

20 Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, 'Jaarverslag 2014', 18-20; General Intelligence and Security Service, 'The Transformation of Jihadism', 28-34.

21 Abels, 'Het Nederlandse Contraterrorisme Beleid', 127; Cliteur, 'Waarom Terrorisme Werkt', 308.

22 Sageman, 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research', 569.

23 Silke, 'Contemporary Terrorism Studies', 34-35; Schmid, 'The Literature on Terrorism', 458-60.

24 Sánchez-Cuenca, 'Why Do We Know So Little?', 594-95.

25 McAllister and Schmid, 'Theories of Terrorism', 202.

the empirical verification necessary to fully determine their validity.²⁶ This is due in large part to one of the most enduring problems in the study of terrorism; the scarcity of primary sources.²⁷ The secondary literature and media reports, still the most prevalent sources in terrorism research, are generally not reliable and detailed enough to function as the sole basis for academic research.²⁸

The goal of this book is to contribute to our understanding of how and why people become involved in European homegrown jihadist groups. It does so through an in-depth analysis of the structural, group-, and individual-level factors that facilitated, motivated, and sustained participants' processes of involvement in the Hofstadgroup. The Hofstadgroup has been chosen as a case study firstly because the author was able to gather extensive primary-sources-based information on the group. Access to such data is seen as a prerequisite for making an empirically substantiated contribution to the existing body of literature. Secondly, the Hofstadgroup is interesting because it was part of what could be termed the first generation of homegrown jihadism in Europe, one that gave rise to similar groups in neighboring states.²⁹ While Chapter 4 argues that past research may have overstated the representativeness of the Hofstadgroup for this broader trend, there are sufficient similarities for the case to yield generalizable insights.

At the same time, the limitations of a single-case study research design must be acknowledged from the outset. The lack of a comparative aspect means the results presented here are first and foremost applicable to the Hofstadgroup itself. Although the present author argues that the similarities between the Hofstadgroup and other European homegrown jihadist entities that arose in the early 2000s allow the case to provide insights relevant to understanding this broader typology as well, it cannot simply be assumed that the explanations for involvement in the Hofstadgroup will all be equally relevant to European homegrown jihadism as a whole. However, although 'n=1' in terms of the number of *groups* studied, this book takes an in-depth look at the involvement pathways of dozens of Hofstadgroup participants. There is therefore an element of comparison and generalizability present within this study despite its focus on a single case study.

26 Ibid., 261.

27 Silke, 'The Impact of 9/11', 76-80.

28 Silke, 'The Devil You Know', 5-6.

29 Nesser, 'Chronology of Jihadism', 934-40; Nesser, 'Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat', 441-49.

This chapter presents the research questions, the methodology and sources used to address them, and concludes by setting out the book's structure. First of all, however, it is necessary to explicate how this study of the Hofstadgroup case can yield new insights. Has more than a decade of research on this group not sufficiently addressed how and why its participants became involved?

1.2 Existing literature on the Hofstadgroup

The Hofstadgroup has been the subject of a wide variety of publications, ranging from academic works to journalistic accounts and government documents. Within this literature, four issues are identified that legitimize the present in-depth analysis of the group. First and foremost, existing publications on the group reflect the broader trend in research on terrorism in their heavy reliance on secondary sources. Furthermore, research on the Hofstadgroup has tended to be *descriptive* rather than *explanatory*. It has also predominantly been focused on a small number of participants, leaving the backgrounds and motives of the wider group relatively untouched. Finally, there has been a tendency to use singular theoretical perspectives that focus only on one of the many potential factors influencing involvement in terrorism identified in the literature. In short, the Hofstadgroup's considerable potential to inform the debate on how and why involvement in European homegrown jihadism occurs has not been fully realized.

1.2.1 Journalistic accounts of the Hofstadgroup

Several journalists have provided descriptions and initial analyses of the main events and actors in the Hofstadgroup timeline.³⁰ Others have produced in-depth biographies and background pieces on particular participants.³¹ Most of these publications utilize at least some primary sources, such as interviews with former participants or their acquaintances,³² information derived from court cases,³³ or even data from police files.³⁴ Particularly

30 Chorus and Olgun, *In Godsnaam*; Groot Koerkamp and Veerman, *Het Slapende Leger*; Derix, 'Hoe Kwam Toch'; Alberts and Derix, 'Het Mysterie'; Vermaat, *De Hofstadgroep*.

31 Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*; 'Op De Thee'; Erkel, *Samir*; Alberts et al., 'De Wereld Van Mohammed B.'; Calis, 'Iedereen Wil Martelaar Zijn'.

32 Chorus and Olgun, *In Godsnaam*; Groot Koerkamp and Veerman, *Het Slapende Leger*.

33 Vermaat, *De Hofstadgroep*; Vermaat, *Nederlandse Jihad*.

34 Eikelenboom, *Niet Bang Om Te Sterven*, 10-11.

noteworthy is Groen and Kranenberg's groundbreaking book on the various women in and around the Hofstadgroup. Based on interviews collected over two years, it offers invaluable first-hand perspectives on what drove these individuals to become involved.³⁵ Similarly, Vermaat's account of the trials against Hofstadgroup participants is especially valuable for its inclusion of verbatim transcripts of what was said during the proceedings.³⁶

Many of these accounts provide informative introductions to the Hofstadgroup. Yet on the whole, the journalistic literature on the Hofstadgroup is unable to provide a comprehensive explanation of the factors that governed the processes by which its participants became involved. Owing to their journalistic rather than academic point of departure, these publications tend to focus on description instead of systematic and theoretically grounded analysis. Furthermore, the empirically most valuable works have limited their focus to specific individuals or segments of the group. Erkel's biography of a leading participant, which mixes information derived from interviews with fiction, is a case in point. As is Groen and Kranenberg's book; while it utilizes extensive interviews, it focuses almost exclusively on the women in the group. The journalistic literature offers a springboard into the Hofstadgroup's world, but leaves considerable uncharted territory.

1.2.2 Primary-sources-based academic research on the Hofstadgroup

Within the academic literature on the Hofstadgroup, a general distinction can be made between studies that utilize primary sources and those that do not. The use of interviews or materials produced by participants makes works in the first category especially valuable. Peters, for instance, has used the texts written and translated by Van Gogh's killer to write an in-depth analysis of the latter's ideological development.³⁷ Several other authors have used interviews to produce biographies of people in and around the Hofstadgroup that provide insights into how and why they became involved.³⁸ There are also numerous descriptive and historical studies based on a mix of secondary sources and primary ones.³⁹ Silber's chapter on the Hofstadgroup

35 Groen and Kranenberg, *Women Warriors*, 17.

36 Vermaat, *Nederlandse Jihad*.

37 Peters, 'De Ideologische En Religieuze Ontwikkeling', 1-87; Peters, 'Dutch Extremist Islamism', 145-59.

38 De Graaf, *Gevaarlijke Vrouwen*, 249-90; De Koning, 'Changing Worldviews and Friendship', 372-92; Van San, Sieckelinck, and De Winter, *Idealen Op Drift*, 44-53.

39 Benschop, 'A Political Murder Foretold'; De Goede and De Graaf, 'Sentencing Risk', 319-23; De Graaf, 'The Nexus between Salafism and Jihadism', 18-20; De Graaf, 'The Van Gogh Murder', 101-42.

is a good example in this regard, providing a detailed overview of events and participants.⁴⁰

De Koning et al. have produced three publications that are notable for utilizing primary sources, looking at the Hofstadgroup in its entirety and being explanatory rather than descriptive in focus. One uses social movement theory to argue that the Hofstadgroup's development was influenced by the increasingly strident debate on the role of Islam in the Netherlands and the accommodating response of Dutch Salafist mosques.⁴¹ Another relies on the concept of governmentality to make a similar point and interprets the group as a rebellious response to the Dutch government's integration and counter-radicalization efforts.⁴² A third contribution, based on the idea of transnationalism, posits that the behavior of Hofstadgroup participants reflected the transposition of global conflicts, in this case a presumed Western war against Islam, to a local setting.⁴³

All of these primary-sources-based academic studies have made valuable contributions to understanding the Hofstadgroup. But like the journalistic accounts discussed earlier, they cannot provide a comprehensive account of participants' involvement processes. First of all because none of these works explicitly focus on this question. The publications that provide an overview of events are good at detailing *what* happened, but their descriptive focus means that they can only partially explain *why* or *how* the group came to be. In-depth studies of particular participants reveal a lot about these individuals' motivations, their worldviews, and involvement processes, but little about the rest of the group. The contributions of De Koning et al. usefully demonstrate the influence that particular factors had in bringing about involvement in the Hofstadgroup, yet as Chapter 2 details, the factors that influence how and why people become involved in terrorism are interrelated and spread over several levels of analysis.⁴⁴ While singular theoretical perspectives can illuminate the influence of a particular variable, they leave the potential influence of many others unaddressed.⁴⁵

40 Silber, *The Al Qaeda Factor*, 206-23.

41 De Koning and Meijer, 'Going All the Way', 234-35; De Koning, "Moge Hij Onze Ogen Openen", 54-55.

42 De Koning, "We Reject You", 105.

43 Bartels and De Koning, 'Submission and a Ritual Murder', 30-31, 33.

44 E.g. Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation*, 21-27.

45 Eyerman does use multiple theoretical perspectives to study the murder of Van Gogh but his work is not concerned with studying how involvement in the Hofstadgroup came about, nor does it utilize primary-sources-based data: Eyerman, *The Assassination of Theo Van Gogh*.

1.2.3 Secondary-sources-based academic research on the Hofstadgroup

Only a small number of academic studies on the Hofstadgroup use primary sources. For the most part, this literature relies on newspaper articles or existing publications to substantiate the arguments being put forward. The uncertain reliability of media reporting on terrorism, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, has had the unfortunate result of casting doubt on the accuracy and completeness of at least some of the information on the Hofstadgroup found in this category. This problematizes how much we can confidently assert to know about what the Hofstadgroup was, what it did, and what led its participants to become involved.⁴⁶

The benefits of hindsight and access to primary sources reveal that numerous secondary-sources-based explanations for the Hofstadgroup contain inaccuracies. This is a particularly prevalent issue in early studies of the group, where authors had little choice but to rely on media reports. For example, there is no reliable basis for the idea that Van Gogh's murderer was directly motivated to kill by the escalation of the Iraq war,⁴⁷ Dutch counterterrorism measures,⁴⁸ or European immigration policies.⁴⁹ It is also disputable that the group was led by Van Gogh's killer,⁵⁰ that it had a distinct organizational structure,⁵¹ planned to assassinate Portuguese Prime Minister José Barroso,⁵² or had links to al-Qaeda.⁵³ Similarly, the claims that Van Gogh's assailant became violent after being turned down by a girl,⁵⁴ that his violent act followed unsuccessful attempts to carve out a place in Dutch society,⁵⁵ or that two individuals arrested in June 2005 were on their way to kill a Dutch politician, lack a reliable empirical basis.⁵⁶

46 Egerton, 'The Internet and Militant Jihadism', 116-21; Egerton, *Jihad in the West*, 75-83, 114, 121, 125, 129, 150-51; Eyerman, *The Assassination of Theo Van Gogh*, 5; Likar, *Eco-Warriors*, 107-08, 113-15, 228-29; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 85-88; Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 78, 130; Silber and Bhatt, 'Radicalization in the West', 24-25, 32-33, 38, 40, 47-48; Van der Hulst, 'Terroristische Netwerken', 14-15, 47; Nesser, 'The Slaying of the Dutch Filmmaker', 8-9, 20, 22, 24-25; Nesser, 'Jihadism in Western Europe', 332-37.

48 Nesser, 'The Slaying of the Dutch Filmmaker', 8, 20, 24.

49 Nesser, 'Lessons Learned', 3.

50 Nesser, 'Europe's Global Jihadis', 246.

51 Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 337-38, 340.

52 Vidino, 'The Hofstad Group', 583; Leiken, 'Europe's Mujahideen', 5; Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 344-45.

53 Wilkinson, 'International Terrorism', 22-23.

54 Transnational Terrorism Security & the Rule of Law Project, 'The "Hofstadgroep"', 6.

55 Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, 22-23; Jacobson, *The West at War*, 6.

56 Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 405.

Of course, none of this is to say that the secondary-sources-based literature on the Hofstadgroup should be dismissed out of hand. It includes many insightful overviews of events and interesting hypotheses on how and why involvement came about. This segment of the literature also encompasses publications whose value is primarily their ability to be thought-provoking. For instance, Cliteur has argued that excessive political correctness has prevented a full appreciation of the group's Islamist motivations.⁵⁷ Likewise, there are various pieces that assert⁵⁸ or dispute⁵⁹ that the Hofstadgroup can be linked to the failure of multiculturalism that are essentially societal critiques. Nevertheless, moving towards a more complete and accurate understanding of the various factors that underlay the involvement processes of its participants necessitates the use of more reliable sources of information.

1.2.4 Insights by proxy

A third set of publications provides insights by proxy. De Poot et al. have conducted a study on the various homegrown jihadist networks active in the Netherlands between 2001 and 2005, of which the Hofstadgroup was one.⁶⁰ These authors use police files to provide insights into a range of factors relevant to these groups, such as their members' socioeconomic backgrounds or their daily routines. However, because such findings are agglomerated and completely anonymized, it is difficult to isolate which are specific to the Hofstadgroup. A similarly indirect perspective is offered by the autobiography of Yehya Kaddouri. While Kaddouri was not a Hofstadgroup participant, his September 2004 arrest on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack allows the book to provide an interesting first-hand impression of how a young Dutch Muslim could become involved in militant Islamism in the early 2000s.⁶¹ It draws particular attention to the role of the Internet, news of violence perpetrated by and against Muslims, and feelings of discrimination as facilitating and motivating such involvement.⁶²

57 Cliteur, 'De "Eigen-Schuldtheorie"', 185-97; Cliteur, 'De Lankmoedige Elite', 207-35; Cliteur, 'Waarom Terrorisme Werkt', 307-45.

58 Carle, 'Demise of Dutch Multiculturalism', 68-74; Spruyt, 'Liberalism and the Challenge of Islam', 320-21; Leiken, 'Europe's Angry Muslims', 120-26; Leiken, 'Europe's Mujahideen', 3-6; Esman, *Radical State*; Wessels, *De Radicaal-Islamitische Ideologie Van De Hofstadgroep*, 24; Mak, *Nagekomen Flessenpost*, 34-37.

59 Aarts and Hirzalla, 'Lions of Tawhid', 18-23; Mak, *Gedoemd Tot Kwetsbaarheid*, 20.

60 De Poot et al., *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*.

61 Kaddouri, *Lach Met De Duivel*.

62 *Ibid.*, 10-34.

Several scholars have undertaken empirical studies of the Dutch Muslim community from which useful parallels with the Hofstadgroup can be drawn. Because the group's participants were ideologically strongly influenced by the fundamentalist 'Salafist' interpretation of Islam, the in-depth analysis by Roex et al. of the Dutch Salafism provides several informative insights.⁶³ In particular, fieldwork derived information on Dutch Salafists' attitudes towards democracy, and the degree to which they support violence.⁶⁴ Buijs et al. investigated how the convictions of 'democratic' and 'radical' Dutch Muslims differed and what drove the latter to become radicalized.⁶⁵ Among their conclusions are the findings that radicalization can be the result of a reaction to perceived injustice, a search for meaning in life, or a desire for social solidarity.⁶⁶

Slootman and Tillie conducted a study on why some Dutch Muslims in Amsterdam became radicalized. Their research is based partly on interviews with twelve young men in the 'periphery' of the Hofstadgroup.⁶⁷ 'Periphery', however, does not appear to mean that these individuals actually participated in any direct sense in the Hofstadgroup but, rather, that they shared its interpretation of Islam. Their conclusions that radicalization is tied to very orthodox religious convictions, the perception that Muslims are treated unjustly, and that Islam as a whole is threatened, are valuable nonetheless.⁶⁸ The main benefit of these and the other 'insights by proxy' is that they draw attention to factors that influenced the radicalization of groups and individuals quite similar to the Hofstadgroup, thus hinting at factors with above-average explanatory potential.

1.2.5 Research on the Hofstadgroup by government agencies

Reports written by the AIVD, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), and the Dutch Review Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services (CTIVD) constitute the last category of publications on the Hofstadgroup. Although the AIVD report on the Hofstadgroup is largely descriptive, it does raise several potential explanations for involvement, such as peer pressure and the influence of a charismatic

63 Roex, Van Stiphout, and Tillie, 'Salafisme in Nederland'.

64 *Ibid.*, 274-76, 280-82.

65 Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy, *Strijders Van Eigen Bodem*, 18.

66 *Ibid.*, 251.

67 Slootman and Tillie, 'Processen Van Radicalisering', 3, 85-106.

68 *Ibid.*, 4.

religious authority figure.⁶⁹ These hypotheses are worthy of further investigation not in the least because the conclusions are drawn from information collected by the agency itself. The NCTV study is concerned with Internet usage by jihadists in general, but provides some relevant information on the Hofstadgroup in this regard.⁷⁰ The CTIVD reports are arguably the most useful of the three, as they detail when the AIVD began collecting intelligence on the Hofstadgroup and what it knew of Van Gogh's murderer and possible accomplices.⁷¹

1.3 Claim to originality

From journalistic accounts to government reports, while the best studies on the Hofstadgroup provide key *parts* of the overall puzzle, a comprehensive and robustly empirical account that explains how and why participants became involved in the group is lacking. This knowledge gap provides the primary rationale for the current study, which makes a threefold contribution to the existing literature. First of all, it aims to improve our understanding of the factors that governed involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Secondly, because this group was not a unique phenomenon but one example of the broader European homegrown jihadist trend, the research will also provide insights into processes of involvement in this typology of terrorism in a more general sense. Finally, by utilizing extensive primary sources, this book aims to contribute to moving terrorism research toward a more empirically robust basis.

1.4 Research questions

Two important premises drawn from the literature on terrorism form the foundation of this book. Explained in detail in Chapter 2, the first of these is that involvement in terrorism is best understood as the end-result of a complex process rather than a sudden or clearly made decision. Secondly,

69 General Intelligence and Security Service, 'Violent Jihad in the Netherlands', 9, 37, 39-41. See also: Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, 'Jihadistisch Terrorisme in Nederland', 88.

70 National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 'Jihadists and the Internet: 2009 Update', 69.

71 Commissie van Toezicht betreffende de Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdiensten, 'Toezichtsrapport Met Betrekking Tot Mohammed B.', 8-24; Commissie van Toezicht betreffende de Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdiensten, 'Toezichtsrapport over Eventuele Handlangers', 1-41.

the involvement process is itself predicated on multiple factors that reside at the structural, group, and individual levels of analysis.⁷² Structural-level analyses focus on the broader social, political, and economic influences that shape motives and opportunities for engaging in terrorism. Group-level explanations focus on how small-group dynamics influence group formation and the establishment of a social reality conducive to the adoption of extremist worldviews and violent behavior. Individual-level accounts for terrorism examine the personal histories of terrorists and assess whether mental health issues or personality profiles offer explanations for their involvement in violence.

The overarching question that this book poses is: What factors governed the involvement processes of participants of the Hofstadgroup during its 2002-2005 existence? Based on the premises outlined in the previous paragraph, three subsidiary research questions are formulated which function as stepping-stones towards addressing the main research question. These are: How did 1) structural-level factors, 2) group-level factors, and 3) individual-level factors influence involvement in the Hofstadgroup? It should be noted that the emphasis is on understanding processes of involvement rather than a singular process. It is apparent from the outset that even within this one particular group, not all participants thought and acted similarly. The fact that only a minority of Hofstadgroup participants actually planned or perpetrated acts of terrorist violence, is the most obvious example of this fact. The discussion that follows thus looks at how such different forms of involvement can be explained.

1.5 Research method

This book combines the author's background in history with the interdisciplinary nature of the study of terrorism. The historical method is reflected in the emphasis placed on analyzing primary sources; Dutch police files on the Hofstadgroup and interviews with former participants as well as Dutch government employees involved in the case. Rather than letting these materials speak for themselves, however, the author examines this material by drawing on insights from the literature on terrorism. Essentially, existing explanations for involvement in terrorism are used as 'lenses' through which to study the available empirical data. Over the course of five chapters,

72 Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 23; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 7-10; Taylor and Horgan, 'A Conceptual Framework', 586.

structural-, group-, and individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism are applied to the Hofstadgroup to see whether they can illuminate distinct explanatory variables. Each relevant explanation is briefly introduced, its main assumptions are identified and then applied to the Hofstadgroup to see if it offers meaningful insights.

This methodological approach has three distinct benefits. First, it allows for a theoretically guided and robustly empirical understanding of the factors that influenced involvement in the Hofstadgroup to emerge. Second, it enables a reflection on the applicability of the various hypotheses on involvement in terrorism to European homegrown jihadism as represented by the Hofstadgroup. Although single-case studies cannot provide conclusive evidence of a theory's explanative potential or lack thereof, they can provide important empirical evidence relevant to those theories. This form of theory testing is especially important in the context of terrorism studies, as various authors have pointed to the field's tendency to develop explanations without sufficiently assessing their empirical validity.⁷³ A third benefit of this approach is that it can highlight hypotheses of above-average explanatory potential. What were the most salient factors that led to involvement in the Hofstadgroup? Conversely, the methodological approach followed here can help *disprove* the applicability of hypotheses thought to be of general relevance.

No research method is without its drawbacks. The most salient one here being the deliberate choice to focus on breadth rather than depth. By using existing insights as analytical tools to better understand the processes that led to involvement in the Hofstadgroup, a broad perspective is gained on the variety of factors on which individuals' participation was based. A downside is that no single explanatory variable is studied exhaustively. Many of the explanations used in this book are at the heart of decades of debate and research. The multicausal approach utilized here requires reducing the complexity of individual theories to a short summary of their constituting elements and the main lines of scholarly argument for the sake of clarity and space. An in-depth and empirically grounded analysis of the many theories discussed in these pages would undoubtedly be a fruitful avenue for future research on involvement in European homegrown jihadism, but falls outside of the scope of the present undertaking.

73 Aly and Striegher, 'Examining the Role of Religion', 849-50; King and Taylor, 'The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists', 616; Lia and Skjølberg, 'Why Terrorism Occurs', 28; McAllister and Schmid, 'Theories of Terrorism', 261.

Following the main research question's focus on the factors that brought about involvement in the Hofstadgroup, the unit of analysis is the individual participant. Whether the discussion is on the structural-level influences such as poverty or on group-based processes such as peer pressure, the (implicit) question is always to what degree these factors exerted an influence on the young men and women who constituted the Hofstadgroup. After all, it was these individuals' convictions, their backgrounds, their actions, and their interactions with each other and the world outside of the group that made the Hofstadgroup what it was. This study is thus primarily concerned with charting the processes that led these people to become interested in a radical or extremist interpretation of Islam, brought them together with like-minded individuals and, in a small number of cases, motivated them to commit or plan an act of terrorism.

1.6 Sources of information

Two types of primary sources are utilized in this book. The most important of these in terms of the amount of information they contain and the frequency with which they are referenced are the files that the Dutch National Police Services Agency (*Korps Landelijke Politiediensten*, KLPD) assembled during its various investigations of Hofstadgroup suspects.⁷⁴ Permission to use this material was granted following the submission of a formal written request to the office of the Prosecutor General.⁷⁵ This data is supplemented with semi-structured interviews with Dutch government officials who were involved in the Hofstadgroup investigation and former participants in the Hofstadgroup itself. The following paragraphs provide further information on these sources and a critical assessment of their utility.

1.6.1 Using police files to study terrorism

The police files contain thousands of pages of information obtained in a variety of ways. Principally, these are the police's interrogation of suspects and witnesses, the results of house searches, phone and Internet taps, and a

74 The various police investigations were collated into two dossiers; 2004's 'RL8026' and 2005's 'Piranha'. References to these files always list one of these dossiers, followed by a section reference if applicable, and a page number. In 2013, the KLPD was renamed the National Unit (LE).

75 The Ministry of Security and Justice gave written permission to use the files for research purposes on 8 March 2013.

limited degree of information provided by the AIVD. Much of this material can be considered a primary source of information as it is a verbatim record of what Hofstadgroup participants said, wrote, and did. Particularly useful are wiretapped phone calls and transcripts of online chat conversations as they are unaffected by the wish to downplay culpability or provide post-event rationalizations, factors that may diminish the reliability of police interrogations and interviews with researchers.⁷⁶

Another benefit of the police files is that they represent the totality of information gathered during the investigations into the Hofstadgroup's participants that followed the various arrests in 2003, 2004, and 2005. This makes them less subjective than the easier to find public prosecutors' indictments, which only contain that information best thought to fit the prosecution's case against the suspects. The quantity and quality of the information in the police files means that they provide researchers with valuable data on Hofstadgroup participants' backgrounds, worldviews, and actions, as well as intragroup dynamics. Yet care must be taken not to see these files as a 'holy grail' for terrorism researchers. There are distinct drawbacks to their use that must be acknowledged if they are to contribute to a well-balanced analysis.

Police investigations are intended to gather evidence that can be used to charge suspects. This means that there can be a certain bias in the way information is collected and presented.⁷⁷ It also means that the questions investigators posed to suspects and witnesses often differ from what a researcher would have liked to address. There is more emphasis on potential criminal offenses than on, for instance, group dynamics or the why of how of involvement. A related problem is the questionable reliability of statements derived from the interrogation of suspects and witnesses. Suspects in particular are liable to deny the allegations leveled at them, to distort the truth, or to tell outright lies in order to escape sentencing. These limitations necessitate a critical attitude towards the files and the use of complementary sources where possible.

A second limitation of using these police files is that, despite their considerable size, they still provide only glimpses into the Hofstadgroup phenomenon. The files are based on criminal investigations and therefore primarily illuminate those events that occurred around the various arrests of group participants in October 2003, June 2004, November 2004, and June

76 Cottee, 'Jihadism as a Subcultural Response', 743; Harris-Hogan, 'Australian Neo-Jihadist Terrorism', 298-314; Lentini, "If They Know Who Put the Sugar", 1-12; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 76.

77 Lentini, "If They Know Who Put the Sugar", 6-7.

and October 2005. The details of what happened before or between these dates are much less well covered, underlining the need to complement the files with information derived from other sources.

Perhaps most problematic of all is the fact that the police files used here are not publicly accessible. This is a serious shortcoming with regard to transparency. Crucially, however, the files are not a *secret* source. Although the application process is lengthy and cumbersome, researchers and other interested parties can apply for access to the very same materials that the author used and thus assess the claims made in these pages. To further avoid the appearance of 'masquerading behind a thin façade of privileged access to secret sources',⁷⁸ and to increase the reliability of the analysis, references to the files are complemented with publicly available sources wherever possible.⁷⁹ Additionally, it should be noted that the use of confidential data is quite common in the social sciences; full interview transcripts, or information about the interviewees themselves, are seldom provided to readers. Finally, many pieces of information from the police files on the Hofstadgroup have been leaked to the press over the years and can be easily found online.

1.6.2 Using interviews to study terrorism

Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study. Seven of these were held with Dutch government employees involved in the Hofstadgroup case in some capacity and five were held with former Hofstadgroup participants. The government employees comprised of two public prosecutors, two police investigators, one NCTV analyst, one AIVD analyst, and one community policing officer. In addition to these interviews, the author also spoke on a more informal basis with academics and journalists who had previously conducted work on the Hofstadgroup, and with defense attorneys involved in the case. It should be noted that another nine former Hofstadgroup participants were also approached for an interview but declined, did not reply, or were not allowed to speak with the author due to the terms of their release on probation. One former participant could not be contacted because the Dutch prison authorities declined the request for an interview. One government employee involved in the case also declined to be interviewed. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, 'interviews' always refer to data collected by the author and not to police interrogations of suspects or

78 Ranstorp, 'Mapping Terrorism Studies', 26.

79 See also: Horne and Horgan, 'Methodological Triangulation', 182-92.

witnesses. All the interviews were held in Dutch, which means that all direct quotations encountered in these pages have been translated to English by the author. The verbatim Dutch version of quotations is given in the notes.

The semi-structured interview format used here has several advantages. The interviewer decides beforehand the topics he or she wishes to discuss but, in contrast to the more formal fully-structured interview, leaves room for the interview to develop in unforeseen directions.⁸⁰ This allows semi-structured interviews to generate information that the interviewer had not anticipated beforehand. By coming across more as a conversation than as a formal, question-by-question interrogation, semi-structured interviews can also help make interviewees feel more comfortable.⁸¹ This is especially beneficial when sensitive or controversial topics are discussed, such as someone's past involvement in extremism or terrorism.

Interviewees were approached in several ways. The Dutch government employees were either contacted via publicly available e-mail addresses or introduced to the author via his professional network. The majority of former Hofstadgroup participants were found through the Internet and social media websites in particular. Contacts with two of them were established through introductions. None of the interviewees were under any kind of obligation to speak with the author. Most seemed motivated by a simple willingness to help, a chance to speak about a formative period in their lives or professional careers, or the ability to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Hofstadgroup. As most interviewees did not allow a recording device to be used, the author largely relied on handwritten notes.

Information gathered through interviews was utilized in several ways. The government employees were closely involved in investigating, monitoring, or prosecuting the Hofstadgroup. Interviews with these individuals primarily served to establish a detailed chronology of events and to assess the validity of information found in other sources.⁸² Interviews with former Hofstadgroup participants were also used for these purposes, but held two additional benefits. Of particular importance was their ability to act as a counterweight to the 'official' take on events represented by the police files. Interviews with former participants restored a degree of balance to what would otherwise have been an almost total reliance in terms of primary data on materials produced by the Dutch authorities. These interviews were also an ideal way of gaining more information on participants' personal

80 Zhang and Wildemuth, 'Unstructured Interviews', 222.

81 Post and Berko, 'Talking with Terrorists', 147.

82 Tansey, 'Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing', 766.

backgrounds and motives, as well as an insiders' perspective on the group's functioning and internal dynamics.⁸³

Like the police files, the use of interviews poses several concerns. One is their representativeness. Because most former Hofstadgroup participants were not willing to be interviewed or could not be found, the author essentially utilized 'opportunity sampling', interviewing only those who happened to be accessible and willing to talk.⁸⁴ This means that it is unclear how representative these interviewees are for the group as a whole. Another issue with using interviews is assessing their reliability. Ulterior motives such as the wish to justify past conduct or to avoid admitting mistakes can degrade the truthfulness of interviewees' accounts. Furthermore, to what degree can people be expected to accurately recall what they thought or how they felt many years ago?⁸⁵ While interviews can afford unique insights, these issues underline the need to remain critical of data gathered using this method. Wherever possible, information derived from the interviews was complemented with or checked against other (publicly available) sources.

1.7 Ethical guidelines

The use of interviews and data taken from police files posed several privacy and security-related concerns. The author followed the guidelines for the use of personal data set out by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.⁸⁶ In addition, the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, the police files' owner, stipulated several conditions for their use. The most important measure taken to ensure the privacy and safety of the individuals discussed in this book is anonymization. No interviewee or Hofstadgroup participant is referred to by their actual name. Although this measure negatively affects the book's readability, it is a drawback that is outweighed by the benefits in terms of reliability and detail that access to these sources provides. The one partial exception is a Syrian preacher, who is referred to by his *nom de guerre* 'Abu Khaled'. As a central figure in the group, using this moniker ensures a balance between anonymity and readability.

83 Horgan, 'Interviewing the Terrorists', 198-99; Post and Berko, 'Talking with Terrorists', 146.

84 Silke, 'The Devil You Know', 8.

85 Tansey, 'Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing', 767.

86 Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Gedragcode Voor Gebruik Van Persoonsgegevens*.

1.8 A note on terminology

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to one or even a handful of causes. To avoid the implied causality attached to the word 'causes', this book prefers to use the term 'factor'. However, because the literature on involvement in terrorism itself frequently uses the word 'causes', this term will still be encountered during discussions of existing explanations. With regard to 'involvement', this book utilizes a broad definition that sees it as the process of becoming a participant in an extremist or terrorist group in some capacity. As such, involvement encompasses a spectrum of activities, ranging from the relatively benign, such as attending group gatherings, to the clearly violent, such as planning or perpetrating acts of terrorism. Chapter 2 discusses these and other core concepts in more detail.

1.9 Outline

This book consists of ten chapters, including this introduction. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical perspective on researching terrorism. It underlines the need for a primary-sources-based approach and details why three levels of analysis are used to study the factors that governed involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 provide the necessary background on the group. The first presents a chronological overview of the most important events in the Hofstadgroup's timeline to familiarize readers with what happened. The second contextual chapter takes a critical look at what the group was; to what extent are the labels 'homegrown', 'jihadist', and 'terrorist' actually applicable to the Hofstadgroup and how can it be characterized organizationally?

The empirical analysis is presented in Chapters 5 through 9. The first of these looks at structural factors influencing involvement in terrorism, such as poverty, geopolitics, and intergroup inequality. Because of the large number of group-level hypotheses relevant to the Hofstadgroup, that analysis is spread over Chapters 6 and 7. The former deals with group formation whereas the latter looks at group-based motives for terrorist violence. The individual level of analysis is also spread over two chapters; Chapter 8 focuses on cognitive explanations for involvement in terrorism, essentially studying how distinct ways of thinking about and perceiving the world can contribute to involvement in terrorism. Chapter 9 utilizes numerous theories that relate involvement in terrorism to psychological

characteristics such as mental illness, or to the influence of emotions such as frustration, anger, and fear of death. Chapter 10 concludes the book by drawing together the main findings, assessing their implications for academics and policy makers, and looking ahead to fruitful avenues for future research.

