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Understanding Terrorism: A New Perspective through Group Cohesion

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Abstract

Terrorism is a paradoxical phenomenon: Despite its status as a critical global security threat, its strategic effectiveness often proves counterproductive, failing to achieve its core agendas. Therefore, why does terrorism persist as a global threat despite its frequent failure to achieve political or ideological goals? This article argues that the answer lies not in simple political or strategic models, but in the complex, reciprocal relationship between individual psychology and organisational factors. This article introduces a new theoretical framework, the Group Cohesion Model, to analyse this dynamic. This multi-dimensional framework is applied to three of the most dangerous and violent extremist Islamic terror organisations – ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab – using media interviews and testimony reports from current and former members. A comparative analysis between these organisations reveals that the choice to use terrorism is not just a strategic or rational decision. Instead, the model shows it is a complex process of interplay between individual drivers and organisational elements that transform terrorism into a seemingly legitimate action. By presenting these nuanced insights, this new framework sheds light on why these organisations persist and offers ways to develop more effective, multi-dimensional counterterrorism policies.

Keywords: *terrorism, group cohesion, extremist organisations, radicalisation*

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Introduction

Terrorism represents a complex political anomaly – while terrorist groups employ seemingly strategic violence to achieve political or ideological goals, the resulting backlash often proves to be counterproductive. Nevertheless, it remains a formidable threat to global security. Despite its violent nature, before the Al-Qaeda attacks in New York on 11 September 2001, this rather concerning global issue proliferated effectively while remaining largely unnoticed. It can be argued that the fanatical and irrational connotations surrounding terrorism have pushed it into a space of negligence, allowing it to incubate and flourish (Stampnitzky 2013: 50). Even in the face of atrocities such as 9/11, terrorism is criticised for its ineffectiveness in achieving any notable political concessions. In fact, despite the scale of violence and destruction, a substantial portion of the literature argues that terrorism has consistently failed to secure its desired political or ideological concessions (Abrahms 2006; Neumann & Smith 2007; Schelling 1991). This persistent ineffectiveness, however, underlines a fundamental puzzle that remains to be fully addressed – to understand the underlying drivers that compel groups to engage in acts of terrorism.

Political science scholarship has extensively explored the causes of terrorism. Martha Crenshaw (1981), for instance, contributed valuable insights into the motivations behind such acts. However, a key gap remains: Despite prevailing assumptions that terrorism is an ineffective tactic, we lack a comprehensive understanding of why it is chosen as a seemingly desirable strategy for achieving political, ideological and religious goals. Moreover, much of the literature examines individual motivations and organisational dynamics separately, overlooking the reciprocal relationship between those elements. While this approach allows for an in-depth analysis of individuality, motivations and organisational structures, it fails to capture the intricate interplay between these factors. This isolated approach ultimately limits the understanding of complex dynamics that underlie the existence of terrorism.

Moving beyond this political lens, incorporating psychological elements into the analysis of terrorism offers valuable insights. This approach allows us to further unpack this phenomenon through two key, yet not fully synthesised, questions: What factors make terrorism seem legitimate or desirable for certain groups, and what brings these groups of individuals together? In light of these inquiries, this paper aims to propose a new perspective on terrorist behaviour and organisational structure by addressing 'What drives radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and ISIS, embedded in a specific interpretation of Islamic teachings, to choose terrorism over alternative courses of action?' The

theoretical and practical significance of this research is twofold: first, it develops a multilevel framework that integrates individual and organisational factors; second, it demonstrates how this framework can enhance both theoretical understanding and policy response to terrorism.

Creating a psychological explanation of terrorism is a politically and intellectually challenging task. Despite the divergence between psychology and political science, behavioural theories still offer valuable insights for researchers seeking to understand the core motives behind why terrorism is chosen over other avenues of action. Within this scope, group cohesion, rooted in the foundational work of Kurt Lewin's (1947) field theory, is an outstanding aspect in the realm of social psychology. Grounded in this group cohesion model, this paper hypothesises that terrorist organisations choose terrorism due to the reciprocal interplay between individual factors such as trauma, humiliation and deprivation, and group factors such as collective identity and decisions. These interactions form the foundation for terrorist organisations to legitimise and amplify their actions.

The remaining sections of this paper establish this argument in the following order: first, a careful overview of existing literature on the use of terrorism will provide a foundational understanding of the conventional view on terrorism; second, a multi-dimensional model is created through the application of group cohesion principles; third, a detailed analysis of group cohesion dynamics within three terrorist organisations: ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab is presented. Finally, the paper offers a discussion of its findings, and the study will conclude with policy implications on both the national and global levels to prevent the future proliferation of terrorism.

Literature review

The rapid expansion of terrorism, as well as its internationalisation, has transformed a simple concept of terror into a complex phenomenon, extending far beyond traditional political and territorial goals. Given this accelerated growth, it has paved the way for political scientists to assess this issue through a rational lens, also conventionally known as the strategic model. The strategic model suggests that terrorism is conducted or chosen to achieve specific sets of goals that these groups are unable to achieve through normal political means. These goals can vary from forcing political changes to occupying territories (Hoffman 2006; Kalyvas 2004; Merari 1993; Pape 2005). Theories derived from the strategic model assume that terrorism is a choice that is made under rational thinking. Hausken's (2018) analysis of terrorist attacks emphasises the notion that the instrumental rationality of these terrorist organisations frames their motivation to use terrorism as a credible method given their strategic objectives. This presumption of rationality proposes that these organisations operate similarly to state actors, in which they organise terror based on rational calculation of cost and benefit (Fortna 2015; Thomas 2014).

On the most fundamental level, this rational choice to engage in terrorism suggests that groups should make an *ex-ante* calculation of the cost involved in using terrorism and consciously decide that the benefit outweighs the proposed cost. Yet the empirical evidence on terrorism shows that in most cases, these groups do not engage in these careful calculations (Abrahms 2006). This contrast between the theoretical implications and the reality of the outcomes hints that the choice to engage in terrorism goes beyond simple material or political strategic gains.

Hence, scholars such as Boyle (2023) attempted to address this critical gap by expanding the strategic model by fusing Arnold Wolfers' milieu goals, going past the material goals of terrorism while preserving the rational choice framework. The expanded framework argues that ideological and material factors are not sufficient to understand why groups choose terrorism over other means and that groups that engage in terrorism are focused on achieving milieu goals: altering the broader international environment to favour other groups with similar objectives and for their own future course.

While these theoretical models provide crucial insights into understanding the rationale behind choosing terrorism through a rational train of thought, they do not entirely capture the interplay between individual elements and organisational elements in choosing terrorism to achieve its core agendas. To be precise, both the traditional strategic model and Boyle's expanded framework's over-dependency on rational choice has limited its scope to the organisational and collective levels. Even at the individual level, several scholars have restricted their scope by framing individual decisions to use terrorism as a result of collective action (Lichbach 1995; Atran 2003; Boylan 2015). Bringing this gap to attention is theoretically important. While it is true that explaining individual choice to engage in terrorism through group influence has great implications, especially at the societal level, this overlooks the reciprocal dynamic between individuals and groups in resorting to terrorism.

Bypassing this gap is important as both group influence on individuals and individual influence on groups are compulsory elements that make terrorism a credible option. For instance, as Kruglanski and Fishman (2009) explain in their work on psychological factors contributing to terrorism, 'individuals' sense of relative deprivation' and 'humiliation' are factors that allow individuals to embrace radicalisation (ibid.: 8). Yet, theories based on rationalism overlook these important personal or individual psychological factors, given their emotional and irrational nature. The division within the terrorism literature has forced scholarships to assess terrorism through two separate lenses: the rational lens, centred on collective decisions and strategic calculations; and the irrational lens, which emphasises the individual and erratic nature of terrorism.

Though existing literature is successful in recognising the basic factors that pave the way for terrorism, the fragmented analysis of terrorism through rational

and irrational perspectives undermines the critical reciprocal relationship between these two entities. The gap lies in this tendency to evaluate these dimensions separately, overlooking how individual emotional factors and psychological influences can shape – and be shaped – by group-level cohesion as well as strategic objectives. It is worth underscoring that terrorist organisations and their actions by nature are non-static. They vary in motives, capabilities, reachability, ideologies and even tactics. Consequently, while existing strategic models may be analytically and practically sufficient for evaluating rational actors similar to states, they lack the capacity to adequately assess terrorist actors, whose behaviour is highly unpredictable and spontaneous. Accordingly, it is evident that the strategic model is limited to only assessing observable strategic behaviour or at the very best overt strategic tactics of terrorist organisations, making it conceptually thin in understanding the persistence of terrorism.

The limited effectiveness of strategic or rational choice-based models is evident in their theoretical constraints and operational applicability in explaining terrorism. This limitation points to the necessity of a model that captures individual-level factors, organisational dynamics and internal mechanisms enabling terrorism, dimensions for which social psychology provides a particularly well-suited analytical lens. This paper connects this gap by proposing a unified framework rooted in the group cohesion model. This model highlights the reciprocal relationship between individual and group factors and how these factors shape the choice to use terrorism as a credible method. By focusing on the dynamic interaction between individuals and their groups, the group cohesion model demonstrates how individual motivations can shape group cohesion, while the group factors can legitimise and amplify its commitment to terrorism. This integrated approach moves beyond the segregated analysis currently dominant within the terrorism literature, offering a more comprehensive understanding of why terrorism is chosen by these groups.

Group cohesion and terrorism

As mentioned, this paper aims to bridge this gap by utilising a theoretical model: group cohesion, a key concept with roots in the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), a key figure in social psychology. Lewin's pioneering research on group dynamics and his development of field theory in the 1940s laid the groundwork for understanding group cohesion (Adelman 1993). Simply put, group cohesion refers to the factors that enable several individuals to function as a unified group, especially in a hostile environment (Jorgensen et al. 2020). These conditions, reflecting the environments in which terrorist groups operate, allow group cohesion models to explain how such groups make decisions at both individual and collective levels while sustaining operations and preserving their core structure. This model is essential for providing a comprehensive as well as integrated theoretical framework

that explains how individual and group-level dynamics reciprocally interact, offering the field of terrorism a deeper understanding of why terrorism is chosen.

In hindsight, one may believe that terrorism or any other military-related activity is governed primarily through strategy, physical strength, technological capabilities and monetary funding. Indeed, these elements are crucial links that determine the overall activity of terrorist or military groups, but the group cohesion model enables us to dive deep into the group structures that constitute the overall behaviour, dynamics and trajectory at both the individual and group levels. Expanding on this, in his study on cohesion and organisational culture of the British Army, Charles Kirke (2009) introduced a four-dimensional social structure model to visualise cohesion within a British military group. Illustrating the influence of culture in formal and informal settings, the model suggested that a 'highly cohesive British military group can be expected to have, therefore: a clear command structure; a network of durable informal bonds within and among ranks; feelings of belonging to and loyalty towards the group and to any other appropriate group' (ibid: 748). For terrorist groups, integration of both formal and informal engagement between each member and sub-groups is crucial to decide what level or method of terror should be employed to deliver their respective desired outcomes. From this standpoint, the group cohesion model suggests that strong formal and informal bonds are essential for achieving individual and collective consensus, especially when terrorism demands life-altering sacrifices.

Individual attributes play a major role in the decision-making process of a group and its ability to conduct operations effectively. These attributes are a mix of the individuals' desires to remain as part of the group, loyalty and their explicit identification with the group, resulting in generating perceptions that represent high cohesion (Friedkin 2004). In line with the group cohesion model, social identity theory further enforces this notion as more members identify with its group and its goals, the more likely they are willing to 'actively contribute' to the well-being of the group and engage in achieving common agendas (Turner 1986). For many groups, this is achieved through establishing common norms within the in-group. Likewise, members within these groups showcase high levels of satisfaction with their respective roles in the in-group system and engage in more 'organizational citizenship behaviors', further confirming their identity as a part of the group (Keller 1986). In terms of terrorist groups, these groups choose terrorism as a tactic because group cohesion enhances their capacity to bring around a common goal and rationalise extreme actions as necessary for achieving their agendas. This alignment of individual identity with group goals reinforces members' commitment to sustained violent behaviour.

Walking through the principles of group cohesion, Carron et al. (1985) suggest that cohesion could be categorised into two major definitions: (1) group integration and (2) individual attraction to the group. The group integration focuses on

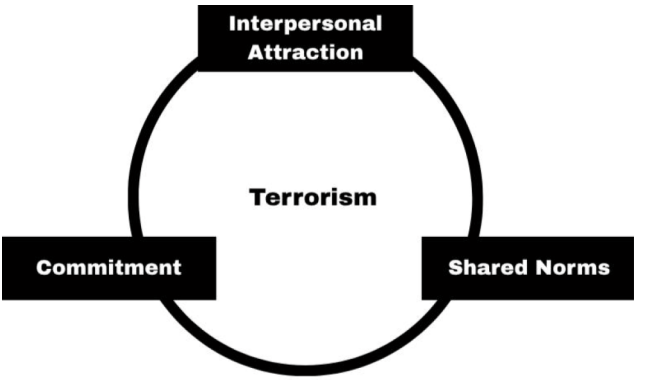
a member's specific perception of the group as a whole, whilst *individual attraction* to the group focuses on the parameters that attracted the member towards the group. The common belief regarding terrorist groups is that new members are recruited through coercive methods. Even though this argument posits some level of truth, many of these members join these groups of their own will, as well as through a volunteer system. This is well clear within terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, in which a huge portion of their members are made up of foreign fighters from Western nations (Benmelech & Klor 2018). A simple look will suggest that using coercive methods in such proximity is virtually ineffective and, most importantly, impractical. As the group cohesion model suggests, first, individuals develop a certain perception of how these groups behave and under what type of agenda they operate. This could range from fighting against a government body to establishing religious or ideological values within a given territory. Following this, certain individuals form a level of attraction to these groups as their personal motivations go in parallel with the given group's agenda and their method of achieving them.

Equally, justice-oriented groups can enforce both the members' emotional and rational sense of justice, especially in ideologically leaning organisations. The broad perceptions of organisational support toward members through a top-to-bottom approach, as well as organisational justice, are powerful approaches in enhancing members' engagement in achieving group agendas with increased levels of *commitment* (Martin 1996). On a similar note, Martha et al. (2008) in their work on 'Group Cohesion as an Enhancement to the Justice-Affective Commitment Relationship' mention the importance of emotional ties in strengthening an organisation, notably in terms of *norm* establishment (ibid.: 742). Therefore, a positive perception of the organisational structure, ideology, procedures, incentives and organisationally-based distributive justice is likely to produce strong emotional engagement for both individuals and the organisation. A dominant view within terrorist groups is that they act as justice-oriented organisations. This is addressed at both the individual and collective levels.

Group cohesion model

The model is grounded in two ways. First, it is consistent with the conventional understanding of group cohesion principles. Second, three elements that consist of both individual and collective essence will be analysed to assess why certain groups choose terrorism. Interpersonal Attraction identifies 'push' or 'pull' factors that facilitate an individual's initial transition into a terrorist organisation. This element specifically focuses on how terrorist organisations utilise trust and social bonding to attract individuals through kinship, religious and socio-economic benefits. Shared Norms lays down how these terrorist groups glorify violence as the most effective and righteous means to achieve their goals and reduce the

Figure 1: Group Cohesion Model



Source: Author

cognitive distance of the members, reinforcing that violence is necessary. This involves focusing on the internal mechanisms of ideological and behavioural alignment through strict indoctrination regimes and in-group interactions to ensure obedience after formal induction. Commitment explains why individuals are less likely to pursue alternative strategies, as they have invested heavily – emotionally and physically – in the group's violent path as it is fostered through shared hardships and rituals. Figure 1 visually represents these three elements as a circular framework, demonstrating how they reciprocally reinforce each other to sustain a group's decision to engage in terrorism.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework to understand 'why terrorism is desired by certain groups over other means of political and societal courses?' through a psychological lens. Noticing that the notion of terrorism is inherently vague and inconsistent, especially given political connotations, this paper directed its focus toward three of the most outstanding terrorist organisations: Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Three major reasons can be noted for choosing these samples. First, all three terrorist organisations seemingly follow a uniform agenda, which is to combat the growing Western influence within the respective regions as well as to expel foreign forces. Second, these terrorist organisations have reached the status of an international character because of their recruitment of foreign fighters and their operational presence in the global theatre across multiple regions. Finally, all three terrorist organisations are widely known for their violent and indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population, such as public executions, bodily mutilations and suicide attacks.

As of now, theories regarding terrorism have solely focused either on an individual scope or mere organisational level. Conducting a comparative analysis between Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and ISIS can help trace patterns that contain both individual and organisational essence. Moreover, recognising these patterns will aid in forming a Group Cohesion Model – the main focus of this paper, fusing both individual and organisational elements in answering the stated research question. Additionally, the selected samples are perfect for understanding their continuous growth throughout the globe, even in the face of international pressure and rejection.

Moving further, given its secretive nature as well as government censorship of sensitive information, collecting necessary data can be a challenging task. In response to these limitations, this paper relies on publicly available secondary data through interviews and media reports in which both current and former members exchange directly about their experiences with the focused terrorist organisations. The desired data were obtained from eight different public media outlets, including Al Jazeera, CNN, CBS, Channel 4, France 24, The Intercept, LADbible and UNILAD, as well as four scholarly research reports, all published between 2009 and 2021. In total, the dataset comprises fifteen interviews and reports, with five sources analysed for each organisation, ensuring both breadth and balance in the analytical process. Given that the data were collected from politically heterogeneous media sources, this paper is uniquely positioned to conduct its analysis with minimal influence from political bias or affiliation. Although this study did not conduct these interviews firsthand, the use of raw and unfiltered testimonies is sufficient to collect valuable information, which enriches this analysis by providing voices directly to the experiences of former and current members. Utilising publicly available sources, interviews and reports allows this paper to address two key research concerns. First, using existing interviews provides access to raw data without prior interpretations, minimising the effects of interpretive bias. Second, sourcing quality data directly from the current and former members further confirms the credibility and reliability of the data.

However, considering the nature of the selected sources, this approach entails two methodological limitations. First, the dataset may possibly be subject to selection bias, as media reporting is often susceptible to information exaggeration and manipulation. Second, the data collected from current and former members are vulnerable to social desirability bias. While former and surrendered members may express regret to facilitate legal leniency and social reintegration, the current members may maintain their ideological stance and commitment for personal protection. Addressing these limitations are important as this paper precisely attempts to manage these biases by analysing varying levels of commitment and loyalty between each member to further validate the model's findings.

Table 1 (see appendix) presents a summary of the data analysed in this study. The collected data were processed through two cycles of coding. In the first cycle,

initial coding was conducted through a careful examination of each interview to identify statements and elements that reflect the three cohesion factors: Interpersonal Attraction, Shared Norms and Commitment. This stage aimed to capture how interviewees describe social interactions, norm establishment and personal dedication, without any predefined order or hierarchy. In the second cycle, pattern coding was applied to detect recurring patterns and to emphasise the cohesion factors across the interviews. Here, the previously initial coded content was reorganised into frames that consist of entry-level, integrative and sustaining cohesion factors, corresponding respectively to why members joined, what integrated them into the organisation and what sustained the organisation's and the individual's survival. Categorising these cohesion factors into frames enables us to break down the circular cohesion process into a recognisable pattern. This highlights how each organisation emphasises specific cohesion factors based on the members' behaviour and the group's internal mechanisms, providing a snapshot of the dynamic interplay unique to each organisation.

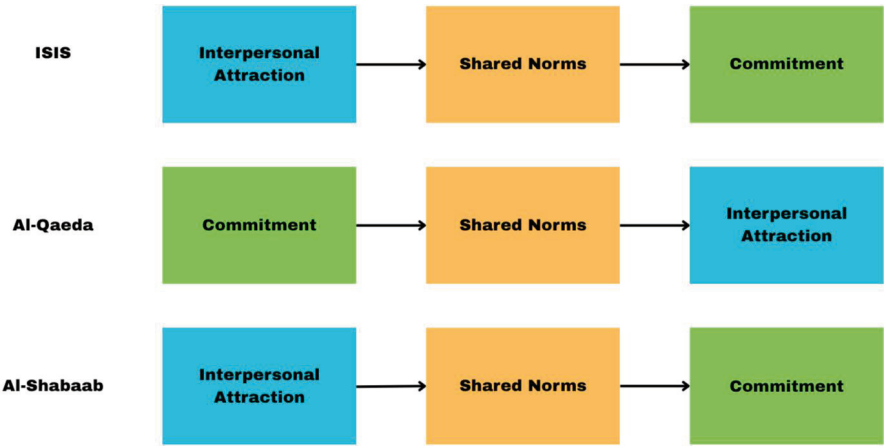
While all three organisations showcase the full spectrum of group cohesion factors, the patterns and emphasis of these elements vary significantly. This variation is not a coincidence; rather, it reflects each organisation's recruitment strategies, ideological foundations and operational methods. This suggests that group cohesion is not static, but a dynamic process shaped by the context in which each terrorist organisation operates. Figure 2 is an illustration of the Group Cohesion Model, visualising the unique evolutionary process and priority of cohesion factors within ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. While presented in a sequential format to identify the primary catalysts and organisational mechanisms, these factors operate as a reciprocal and dynamic process. This visualisation captures a single iteration of the cohesion loop, such as ISIS's Interpersonal Attraction or Al-Qaeda's pre-existing Commitment, initiates a feedback loop that sustains the organisation's integrity and operational strength.

The following analysis will explore how these organisations engage with these cohesion factors and what kind of implications they possess in terms of internal durability and resistance to external pressure.

ISIS: A loop of vulnerability and violence

To put it bluntly, ISIS has profoundly transformed the global perception of terrorism. Its rise, rapid territorial expansion, ability to attract thousands of fighters across regions and disregard for territorial boundaries have forced scholars to rethink how extremist organisations recruit, radicalise and sustain members. In contrast to earlier extremist Islamic organisations that primarily relied on religious ideology and grievances, ISIS conducted a more strategic recruitment campaign that enabled it to attract fighters based on specific needs, whether rooted in their desire to showcase religious allegiance or more personal incentives such as financial needs.

Figure 2: Group Cohesion factors by terrorist organisation



Source: Author

An outstanding characteristic of ISIS's group cohesion pattern is its preliminary emphasis on interpersonal attraction, which acts as a strong catalyst for recruitment. As pointed out by Prezelj and Zalokar (2023) in their assessment on 'Recruitment models and approaches of Islamist terrorist groups', ISIS recruits new members using four different recruitment models: the net model – targeting homogenous groups that are ready for recruitment process, the funnel model – a step-by-step approach to assess whether a recruit demonstrate the desire to become a member, the infection model – carrying out the recruitment in person as well as one-to-one basis, and the seed crystal model – bottom-up recruitment on online forums or websites.

A similar reflection can also be seen in the collected data, as all the members were recruited through diverse means of strategies, ranging from personal networks, online radicalisation forums and social media platforms. For example, one account collected from a captured ISIS commander (unnamed) describes that he was drawn into the organisation not by ideological means but by financial needs, and most uniquely, his status as a lonely individual also contributed to his participation within the organisation. In his words: 'I don't have anyone. I'm poor. I only have God. It was about money for me' (CNN 2018). This indicates that ISIS deploys a unique mix of attraction strategies that not only address one particular dimension but multiple dimensions. Discussing the recruit's financial or economic needs as a state of motivation requires its own implications. In another interview with Derek Stoffel, two captured ISIS militants, Ibrahim and Sayleen, emphasise that they 'joined the militants to pay' for their family members' medical treatments (CBS 2017). While economic needs may be the primary driver for these individuals joining terrorist organisations, ISIS in this context, the process

of recruitment and subsequent group integration involves social interaction, trust-building and dependence – key elements of interpersonal attraction. Individuals experiencing financial restraints show a special vulnerability to be targeted by ISIS recruiters through financial promises in exchange for the desire to become a member, as seen in Prezelj and Zalokar's recruitment models. Equally, ISIS's global reach in recruitment plays a major role in its ability to sustain a resilient operational bubble. Trevor Aaronson and his interview with American ISIS fighter, Russell Dennison, showcase that Russell held critical views towards non-Muslim Americans prior to joining any extremist organisations and how he developed a positive perception of ISIS due to the actions of the first American suicide bomber in Syria, also known as 'Abu Hariara'. In his words, Russell explains that 'He [Abu Hariara] killed over 250 Syrian army soldiers. I was happy to see this . . . because the brother, he really sacrificed himself' (The Intercept 2021). As Trevor Aaronson reveals later, the decisive factor in Russell's decision to join ISIS, however, was not his pre-existing ideological alignment, but his desire to seek protection from the FBI after the wake of his friend's arrest back in the US. Implications in such cases are laid down rather clearly. This need for security and sanctuary acts as a form of tangible socio-economic benefit, similar to financial benefits, solidifying interpersonal attraction as his entry-level cohesion rather than commitment to an abstract cause.

Once interpersonal attractions have facilitated entry into the organisation, the ISIS members go through a rigorous establishment of shared norms that reshape the members' behaviour and their sense of moral obligation. These shared norms serve to align individual identity with the collective goals of the group and to ensure that the members are obedient to the hierarchical structure of the group. Shared norms can be enforced through formal means such as indoctrination, religious rituals and training sessions, or coercive means such as punishments, surveillance and peer pressure. In many cases, ISIS members are placed in environments where daily routines – eating and praying – are repurposed to enhance the members' loyalty and discipline. Such a blend of symbolic reinforcements and behavioural conditions allows ISIS to put in place a cohesive internal structure that is capable of withstanding hostile actions.

Giving another glance to the interview with Russell Dennison, he places significant emphasis on the fact that 'you have to be very careful how you speak, what you speak, who you speak against', providing evidence that ISIS has placed serious punishments or consequences on whoever dares to violate its codes of loyalty (The Intercept 2021). Correspondingly, the interview with the captured ISIS commander reveals that he was required to engage in sexual abuse towards captured women [sex slaves] as a result of peer pressure and required to conduct routine killings, mentioning that 'if I didn't kill, my commander would be ready with his weapon behind me to kill me' (CNN 2018). In addition to that, a surrendered American ISIS

fighter, Mohommad Jamal, points out that ISIS members spend about '8 hours a day praying and learning about religion' (CBS 2016). This provides a glimpse of both formal and coercive means of ISIS's shared norms enforcement.

Shifting toward the sustaining factor of group cohesion, ISIS demonstrates an extraordinary degree of commitment. However, the data illustrates that there is a contrasting display of behaviour between the captured and surrendered fighters, providing valuable insights into the nature of ISIS's internal commitment. Captured members often displayed a high level of psychological loyalty and ideological discipline, even after being detained. A strong portion of the captured ISIS fighters refused to disclose operational details, refused to openly criticise the group, and on many occasions justified the organisation's course of action. In their interview with CNN, when questioned about their alleged involvement in the imprisonment and torture of several Westerners, two British ISIS detainees, Alexanda Ketey and El Shafee El Sheikh, responded, stating, 'it's just an accusation, legally speaking' (CNN 2018). Such delivery of denial indicates not only their loyalty toward the mission of ISIS but also serves as clear evidence on how these fighters justify violence and crime against civilians with their association with the ideological commitment. Within the same interview, when asked about 'Jihadi John', a British-Kuwaiti ISIS fighter responsible for beheading several captives, El Sheikh described him as 'one of the most loyal friends I had. Trustworthy, honest, upstanding'. This provides further understanding of how both interpersonal attractions and shared norms have blended and reinforced the fighters' commitment to engage with the organisation's mission and, therefore, the survival of the organisation. In a contrasting approach, Jamal's interview showed a clear distance between him and ISIS's ideology, demonstrated dissatisfaction with its mission and expressed regret through sharing valuable information regarding ISIS's internal handling (CBS 2016). This suggests that captured ISIS fighters, unlike the surrendered ones, reflect the volume of commitment active or current members have, mapping out the group's ability to withstand external forces. ISIS fighters' high level of commitment to the organisation's course and the method of executions plays a central role in the organisation's long-term resilience. It enables ISIS to reorganise and survive after territorial losses, as it relies on a core of highly committed individuals who are capable of swaying external pressure.

Al-Qaeda: From pre-existing commitment to organisational consolidation

Al-Qaeda holds a special place in the history of terrorism, for rather well-known reasons. Its most infamous operation – the 11 September 2001 terror attack on the US – fundamentally transformed global security policies, leading to the US-led 'war on terror' and the creation of international counterterrorism practices (Huddy et al. 2002). Although the founding father of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden,

was eliminated by US Navy SEAL Team Six on the morning of 1 May 2011, and the organisation came to a *de facto* end, its ideology still remains as fragmented smaller organisations. In terms of understanding this exceptional ability to survive over three decades of counter terrorism efforts, the Group Cohesion Model has captured a unique pattern, reflecting on Al-Qaeda's leadership, strategies and operational methods. While ISIS's group cohesion process progresses from interpersonal attraction to shared norms and then to commitment, Al-Qaeda presents a more reversed pattern, beginning its group cohesion pattern with commitment.

This change in dynamics can be attributed to two major reasons. First, interviews with former and active Al-Qaeda members indicate that individuals who joined the organisation were committed to its cause and the ideology of Al-Qaeda, well prior to their formal induction. In comparison to ISIS fighters, where a considerable portion of the fighters were motivated to join as a result of financial needs, Al-Qaeda members showed more ideologically driven motivations in their participation. In his interview with LADbible (2021b), former Al-Qaeda and ex-jihadist, Manwar Ali, explains his thought process before joining Al-Qaeda as: 'I wanted to be meaningful and I felt I was doing the right thing, because after all, it is in support of the victimized. I didn't believe, I mean non-Palestinians, non-Muslims in general, people, human beings have rights, feelings.' This chain of reasoning lays down a clear foundation that Manwar's was considerably influenced by his extremist ideological views and later reinforced his decision to commit to these views by becoming a part of Al-Qaeda. A similar pattern of experience can be seen in former Al-Qaeda member Aimean Dean's description of himself before formal induction into the organisation (LADbible 2021a). He explains that as a religious student, he joined a Bosnian Jihadist organisation at age 16 in 1994, believing his participation in the defence of Muslim civilians was an honourable act. This further confirms what has been established and detected under the Group Cohesion Model. As shown by both Manwar's and Aimean's interviews, the element of commitment was firmly established prior to the individual's induction into Al-Qaeda, through their affiliation with extremist Islamic ideologies, exposure to indoctrination and their belief in the necessity of challenging the socio-political system against seemingly threatened Muslim communities.

Continuing onward, in the same vein as ISIS, the integrative phase of Al-Qaeda's group cohesion analysis is reserved for the element of shared norms. However, the data suggest that there is a striking difference in the method by which these two terrorist organisations enforce shared norms in their respective members. Whilst ISIS follows a punishment-oriented shared norm establishment, Al-Qaeda indicated a greater emphasis on ideological indoctrination and strong inter-relations. This can also stem from the previous description, given that the members already showed outstanding characteristics of commitment even before their participation in the organisation. To elaborate more on this notion, attention

will be directed once again to the interviews of Manwar and Aimean, where the testimonies of both individuals reflect a normative environment influenced less by coercion and more by ideological reasoning. For instance, Manwar explains that 'the camp was wonderful. I will never forget the brotherhood, the sense of relief, so warm and welcoming' (LADBible 2021b). For many, the term 'brotherhood' illustrates a strong bond between individuals, which can be labelled as exceptional or even outstanding. Manwar's narrative of Al-Qaeda as a safe place for individuals with similar values and ideological compatibilities suggests that the organisation excelled at developing a strong basis for norm enforcement that is free from compulsion. Crucially, this brotherhood extends beyond surface-level social bonding and instead represents a carefully designed standardisation of Al-Qaeda's in-group interactions following members' ordination. This structural reliance on standardised social environments can be recognised as a primary reason why Al-Qaeda is capable of achieving high levels of internal cohesion with less coercion pressure. When questioned about the moral reasoning behind targeting civilians, Aimean explains that 'this is why we have the indoctrination lessons, the religious, ideological indoctrination in order to tell us that there are no civilians as far as our enemies are concerned [the West]' (LADbible 2021a). Ideological and religious indoctrination is at the forefront of norm establishment. A careful comparison between ISIS and Al-Qaeda proposes that despite a clear difference between how each organisation establishes its respective norms, both organisations are seemingly following a similar path pertaining to dehumanising certain groups of the population – non-Muslims and Westerners. To this point, most insights have been drawn from individual and former Al-Qaeda members, and high-ranking members reflect very well on how these norms in discussion have been presented at an organisational level. In his interview with Peter Arnett in 1997, Osama Bin Laden mentions that 'in our religion it is not permissible for any non-Muslim to stay in Arabia' and that 'we do not guarantee their safety' (CNN 2011). With similar respect, another interview with a senior Al-Qaeda member, who goes by Abdullah, notes that 'we don't want to kill people [but] if good people die in these bombings that's not our fault. It's a sign that it's their time to meet Allah' (France24 2009). Through and through, the concept of jihad, the framing of enemies and the use of violence against civilians (even if it's unintended) are consistently justified through religious interpretations, allowing an environment where such actions are rationalised and morally mandated. These shared norms operate at both the individual and organisational level: for individuals, they provide a lens through which actions are legitimised; for the organisation, they ensure internal consistency, loyalty and cohesion.

Al-Qaeda's sustaining factor in group cohesion is allocated toward Interpersonal Attraction. In general, one would expect a terrorist organisation to begin its life cycle or operational process through a recruitment initiative. In that regard,

Al-Qaeda shows a striking difference in how the organisation wants to portray as well as present itself and how the organisation wants to reach its targeted groups or individuals. The group cohesion analysis recognised two major perspectives of Al-Qaeda's recruitment process. First, the organisation emphasises heavily on the suffering of the Muslim populations in the regions. Moving the attention once more to the interview with Osama Bin Laden, he explains that he declared jihad against the US because 'the US government has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous, and criminal through its support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and Arabia. The US is directly responsible for those who have killed in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq' (CNN 2011). These expressions speak directly to whoever experienced any type of injustice, humiliation (indirect or direct) or loss in the face of the US or its allies' counter-terrorist operations. This was greatly illuminated through Manwar Ali's confession of joining Al-Qaeda as a way of fighting back against the status quo, or in other words, the West. A parallel portrayal can be seen in Al Jazeera's one-on-one interview with the organisation's third in command, Mustafa Abu-Yazeed, in which he 'urged the Muslim world not to forget about the fight [of Al-Qaeda]' and 'call on them to support the Jihad' (Al Jazeera 2009). Second, Al-Qaeda leadership figures play a crucial role in fostering interpersonal attraction by presenting themselves as principled and morally composed leaders. Contrary to what most would believe, Aimean Dean explains that the way Bin Laden spoke was very powerful yet soft spoken, and that he did not give the impression of an individual who shows traits of a power-hungry or crazy person. He further emphasises that Bin Laden was 'sincere' in his presence and he was 'very clear about his aims and goals' (LADbible 2021a). These are all outstanding characteristics of a role model for individuals and groups that follow extremist Islamic values, which also acts as an asset for the organisation to lure in individuals with high levels of commitment. Therefore, to some extent, Al-Qaeda's interpersonal attraction is rather a means of attracting individuals who are already committed to the cause.

Al-Shabaab: The interplay of coercion and ideology in fostering cohesion

Among the three organisations, Al-Shabaab is distinguished by its high level of operational secrecy, making information collection exceptionally challenging. This can be attributed to the fact that, unlike ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab operates mainly in Somalia, a country which is widely considered a failed state (Menkhaus 2014). With a lack of functioning central government and a fragmented military force, Al-Shabaab was able to thrive while preserving its secretive nature. Given this notable ability to operate in secrecy while being one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisations, Al-Shabaab exhibits group cohesion patterns that the Group Cohesion Model identifies as striking similar to those of ISIS.

While the group cohesion patterns between ISIS and Al-Shabaab are similar, the collected data suggest a crucial distinction in the nature and intensity of the mechanisms on each stage, especially Al-Shabaab's heavy reliance on coercive methods. For Al-Shabaab, the initial stage of group cohesion, interpersonal attraction, which acts as the entry-level cohesion, can be divided into three different approaches: religious purpose for participation, hijacking for recruitment and poverty as a tool of deceptive recruitment. First, religious purposes for participation serve a significant initial draw for many new Al-Shabaab recruits. In his analysis of interviews with current and former Al-Shabaab fighters, Richard Barrett (2018), through Global Strategy Network (TGSN) and Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS) surveys, explains that a good portion of these members join the organisation with the expectation that Al-Shabaab operates in the name of Islam. One of the oldest participants of the TGSN survey mentioned that he joined the organisation 'because Al-Shabaab was fighting to protect Islam' (ibid.: 322). Barrett further emphasises this by pointing out that about half of the participants in both TGSN and ISS surveys provided some kind of religious purpose for joining Al-Shabaab. Elaborating on this perspective, in his (2012) interview with 15 former Al-Shabaab members, Muhsin Hassan reports that two interviewees explained that 'they [Al-Shabaab] convince you that joining Al-Shabaab is your religious duty and that is what Islam requires of someone in your position'. In the same interview, one interviewee went a step ahead and responded that 'my father bought me a gun and brought it home. He said that if he were me . . . he would be at the front line of the battle and not at home' (ibid.: 19). Highlighting a strategy that goes beyond its organisational borders.

Second, information collected from these interview-based reports underscores that apart from luring in new members through religious interpretations, Al-Shabaab actively engages in recruiting members through hijacking and kidnapping. In his interview with eight former Al-Shabaab members from Kenya, Gabriel Toole (2023) reveals that Al-Shabaab has designed an intricate system of deception and coercion to bring young Kenyans into the organisation. Out of the eight interviewees, four (Barack, Mossi, Saleem and Omari) were recruited to the organisation through coercive strategies such as hijacking, kidnapping and drugging. While Barack was kidnapped with narcotics, Mossi, Saleem and Omari were kidnapped at gunpoint. Their interviews also show that apart from Barack, who was able to escape from the kidnappers after two weeks of entrapment, Mossi, Saleem and Omari eventually agreed to join the organisation in the face of financial promises.

This also brings the third approach to the discussion: poverty as a tool of deceptive recruitment. Jumping back to Toole's interview analysis, former Al-Shabaab members Mossi, Saleem, Omaro and Swaleh testified that initially the recruiters promised to send millions of shillings (Kenyan currency) to their families, and upon their return, they discovered that their families had not received money. The

role of financial manipulation has been a consistent topic throughout this analysis, as shown in ISIS as well as Al-Qaeda. Financial vulnerability is not only easy to manipulate, but financial promises are also attractive for financially crippled individuals in these socio-economically wrecked regions. As shown in both Hassan's (2012) and Barrett's (2018) interviews, being a member of Al-Shabaab allowed these individuals to earn as much as USD 150 monthly, and senior members joined the organisation in the hope of better opportunities.

Like the other two terrorist organisations, for Al-Shabaab, the integrative cohesion factor is reserved for developing shared norms between its members. Rigorous religious indoctrination has been a key element throughout this analysis. Out of all the Al-Shabaab interviews, Toole's (2023) interviews with the former Al-Shabaab members provide the most detailed information regarding life in the Al-Shabaab camps and what kinds of procedures these individuals had to go through. Two former members, Saleem and Swaleh, explain that the initial training starts with Islamic lessons, daily prayers and establishing rules of camp (ibid.: 1357–1358). After the basic training, the recruits are sent on missions such as raids, from which many would not return. In Swaleh's words, 'once every week, they must do a raid. And you know people who are being sent, the small boys who have come now, they were going on the worst ones'. The interview next indicates that along the same lines as ISIS, Al-Shabaab also follows strict rules with punishments in various manners. In another interview with two friends who joined Al-Shabaab, Hamidi and Issa recall that each individual was given a specific time in which to complete their tasks, and failing to do so would potentially get them killed. In their words:

> They will say, "this one will take you a week for that job to be complete." If you fail they will cut [off] your finger. If you fail again, now they come and they will chop the whole hand. And if you fail and they see that you don't have one hand, eventually they will just kill you. (ibid.: 1361)

According to these interviews, the rules were clear: Any failure to comply with Al-Shabaab's directives would inevitably lead to execution.

Commitment emerges as the sustaining factor in Al-Shabaab's group cohesion process. Al-Shabaab's and its members' commitment to its goals can be understood at two levels. As seen again and again, the topic of religion in terrorism is complex, though very much foundational because of its ability to mould an organisation's goals to an individual's own life goals. Jamal Osman's interview with Al-Shabaab's spokesperson, Sheikh Ali Dhere, states that:

> Our objective is to free our country. To govern our people under Islamic Law. And to free our people, our country, and our religion . . . . When they

> kill our people, we kill theirs . . . . All Muslims should support each other. And we welcome any of them who accept our invitation. (Channel 4 2013)

The lack of hesitation to threaten or inflict violence on the civilian population demonstrates the organisation's commitment to achieving its goals by any means necessary. The role of religious interventions does not stop here. In Toole's (2023) interview with Swaleh, he points out that Al-Shabaab engages in a type of filtration process to ensure that members show real interest in Islam. Otherwise, the ones that do not show any real interest in Islam will be sent on more dangerous missions. In his words, 'even if you are the best at training, but you are not a Muslim, you will be put at the warfront' (ibid.: 1358). This allows the organisation to utilise members who show real commitment to its cause, which can be crucial in missions such as suicide attacks and assassinations.

Next, Toole's interviews uncover a unique feature of Al-Shabaab in comparison to ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The excessive use of drugs among its members. Apart from Saleem, who escaped the Al-Shabaab camp just after one month, every other interviewee mentioned the regular use of drugs such as cocaine by Al-Shabaab members. Abdul, one of the former Al-Shabaab members, explains the use of drugs: 'they have something they gave us, something that made us not fear anything. I don't know what it was. It was something we ate. It made us feel invincible' (ibid.: 1358). This extensive administration of drugs to its members showcase a major strategic aspect of Al-Shabaab's internal controls. By fostering drug addiction among its members, Al-Shabaab creates an environment where drug dependency functions as a form of currency, allowing members to be compensated with drugs in exchange for fulfilling the group's objectives. From another aspect, as the organisation relies largely on deception and violent coercion, it indicates a clear deficit in genuine commitment and loyalty within its members. This also presents a membership base that may lack satisfaction with the organisation's mission. As a result, Al-Shabaab's reliance on drugs represents a unique mechanism to artificially impose commitment where organic commitment may be lacking. For the organisation, this ensures that its members are committed to its cause and use drugs as a control mechanism. This creates a state of coercive commitment, where the members' dedication to the group's violent path is rooted in their desperate physical and mental dependency on the organisation for survival.

Discussion

Pulling all these together, the Group Cohesion Model shows that the choice to choose terrorism is not a simple rational decision that is fundamentally based on a cost-benefit approach, nor is it limited to individual psychology to seek revenge or belonging. As Brent Ellis (2003) showed in his framework to guide counterterrorism policymaking, 'the implications of the complexity of contemporary

terrorism are significant' (ibid.: 1), reaffirming this paper's speculations in regard to the complex dynamic interplay between individual and organisational elements in choosing terrorism as a continuous desirable strategy.

The analysis of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab very well reflects the complexity of these terrorist organisations. For one, the respective Group Cohesion Models for these organisations are shown to be varied in respect to their recruitment strategies, goals, operations, group structure and in-group interactions. While ISIS' and Al-Shabaab's group cohesion patterns put initial emphasis on Interpersonal Attractions, then Shared Norms and finally Commitment, Al-Qaeda's group cohesion order stands as Commitment, then Shared Norms and lastly Interpersonal Attractions. The analysis suggests that this change in the positions between Interpersonal Attraction and Commitment is attributed to one major reason. It is the nature of individuals who choose to join these organisations. Whereas individuals affiliated with ISIS and Al-Shabaab often join these organisations due to financial desperation or societal pressure to conform to religious norms, those associated with Al-Qaeda have been shown to join out of prior ideological commitment and genuine allegiance to the group's objectives. In other words, Interpersonal Attraction functions as an entry-level factor when individuals are drawn to the group by tangible, socio-economic benefits like compensation, a sense of belonging or protection from external threats. In contrast, commitment acts as the entry-level factor when individuals are already dedicated to the group's abstract cause or ideology prior to their formal induction. This does not imply that all individuals who join ISIS and Al-Shabaab lack ideological commitment or are driven solely by financial hardships or social coercion. Nevertheless, the composition and motivational profile of recruits in these groups differ significantly from those of Al-Qaeda.

Remarkably, in the Group Cohesion Model patterns of all three terrorist organisations, Shared Norms were placed in a unique, uniform position. Close analysis of each organisation explains that, regardless of the motive to join the respective organisation, once recruited, new members should go through a thorough norm establishment process that is distinctive to each organisation. Shaping these recruits to behave and think in parallel to the organisation's goals and, most importantly, the method of fulfilling the stated goals, not only reinforces their decision to perceive engaging in terrorism as legitimate but it also crystallises using terrorism as the primary method of conduct. As there is a clear and direct reciprocal interplay between the individuals and the organisation at this stage, the element of dehumanisation also plays a major role in this mesial cohesion factor.

Clinging to a singular, one-dimensional analysis of terrorism is a deliberate invitation to blind ourselves to its true complexity and resilience. The findings of this paper underscore the critical necessity of a multilevel approach to evaluating terrorism, which integrates both individual factors and organisational factors. The

very persistence and adaptability of groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab may stem from this critical gap, as traditional analyses have often failed to integrate both individual and organisational dynamics into a one robust framework.

It is important to clarify that this paper does not argue that group cohesion is the single best and only way to evaluate the complex nature of terrorism. On the contrary, the model acts as a foundational tool to illuminate the interconnected dynamics of individual and organisational factors, filling a significant gap in the terrorism literature that has historically viewed these elements in isolation. Integrating social psychological elements, such as group cohesion, into the fields of political science and international relations to study terrorism is a unique contribution of this paper. Though such interdisciplinary methods are still gaining traction, the findings suggest that this is not only appropriate for understanding terrorism but a necessary step for further development of terrorism studies. A key finding of this paper is that the Group Cohesion Model's application varies across the respective organisations, in which it does not assume that these organisations operate with the same individual triggers or internal processes. Given this complexity, a rigorous, context-based analysis of each organisation remains necessary even to properly lay out their Group Cohesion Models. Clarifying that, the Group Cohesion Model is intended as a stepping stone and a foundation for future multi-dimensional approaches to understanding terrorism.

Policy implications for countering terrorist proliferation

The conventional approaches for counter-terrorism are fragmented and largely fail to account for the varied internal dynamics that sustain different terrorist organisations. This paper, which identified distinct Group Cohesion Models for groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab, suggests that a more nuanced multi-approach strategy that accommodates preventative and offensive approaches is required to achieve effective results.

A key takeaway of this paper's Group Cohesion Model is that terrorist organisations often leverage Interpersonal Attraction by exploiting underlying factors such as poverty, trauma and lack of opportunities to attract new members. This highlights the necessity of preventative policies that address these specific vulnerabilities. The 2004 Aceh, Indonesia, tsunami reconstruction programmes, the economic incentives of the 1998 Good Friday Agreements and development programmes in Mindanao, Philippines, are great examples of how simple economic interventions can greatly reduce the public need to affiliate with radical groups or separatist organisations. Although these programmes were not targeted at countering terrorist organisations or global terrorist organisations such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, the underlying factors driving individuals toward terrorism remain the same, offering valuable lessons to be learned. On top of that, the exploitation of religion as a tool for influencing individuals to join extrem-

ist organisations emerges as a significant observation throughout this paper's analysis. Such tactics go past national or regional borders, making terrorism prevention operations exceptionally difficult. Recognising this difficulty, terrorism prevention operations should expand beyond governmental institutions and cooperate with civil societies and religious institutions. In this approach, the Indonesian Counter-terrorism Agency's (BNPT) multi-dimensional initiative to tackle radicalisation with the cooperation of the largest Muslim organisations in the country, Nahdlatul Ulama, should be taken as a great example. Schmidt (2021) points out two major counter terrorism or extremist initiatives of Nahdlatul Ulama: challenging extremist interpretations of the Quran through a video documentary and contesting extremist views on social media. While the exact effectiveness of such initiatives is hard to measure, the gradual decline of terrorist activities in the country and zero terrorist incidents in 2023 surely illustrate the broader capabilities (US Department of State 2024).

Next, a similar level of strategic emphasis should be allocated to dismantling the recognised integrative cohesion factor in each organisation. This paper's analysis indicates that Shared Norms contain a unique static position in the integrative frame across all three models, where rules, norms and collective resolve is crystallised. Terrorism preventative operations and deradicalisation programmes by themselves aren't adequate to dismantle active terrorist organisations, particularly international ones. A measured and balanced use of force, particularly military strategies aimed at leadership elimination, is a crucial part of disrupting the internal structure and cohesion of these organisations. Elimination of key figures, such as Al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and ISIS's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, proved effective not just by removing a commander, but by dismantling the ideological and structural bonds that hold these groups together.

However, military actions should be employed with caution and should be designed to incorporate law enforcement-centric models, which are capable of breaking the cycle of creating new grievances. Simultaneously, non-violent strategies are necessary to capitalise on internal dissatisfaction and encourage defection. This requires customised de-radicalisation programmes that are capable of conducting offensive operations against the group's ideological control. For groups similar to ISIS and Al-Shabaab, whose norms are enforced through punishment-oriented coercion, government bodies should develop clear pathways to encourage members to defect from organisations, ensuring their protection and amnesty to counteract the fear of persecution. Additionally, for the organisations whose norms are built more on ideological indoctrination and a strong sense of belonging, programmes must work in cooperation with religious and social mentors to dismantle the strong moral mandate that legitimises violence. Such actions address the very core of a group's cohesion, and the importance cannot be overstated. Advocates for non-violent counter-terrorism strategies should

recognise that globally active terrorists, if left unchecked, can rapidly expand their capabilities to a point that threatens global security in unimaginable ways.

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Appendix

Table 1: Statements from current and former members of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab categorised by Group Cohesion Factors

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
9 April 2018. CNN. CNN sits down with the ISIS ‚Beatles'	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Interviews with British IS detainees Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee El Sheikh show their continued allegiance to ISIS was driven by negative experiences with the American military, loyalty to Islam, and admiration for fellow IS members.
15 February 2018. CNN. Stacey Dooley: Face To Face With An Isis Commander	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	A captured ISIS commander stated he joined due to poverty and reliance on God, described being pressured into sexual abuse, and claimed he killed under threat from his commander.
29 December 2017. CBS News. Face to Face with ISIS members: Derek Stoffel's reporter's notebook	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Captured ISIS members Ibrahim and Sayleen said they joined to fund medical treatment for sick relatives; Ibrahim admitted his boss killed defectors, while Sayleen denied harming anyone and showed notable restraint in criticizing ISIS.
19 March 2016. CBS. American ISIS member being interviewed by FBI	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Indoctrination through religious education and prayer routines
15 July 2021. The Intercept. An American ISIS Fighter Describes the Caliphate's Final Days — and His Own	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Russell, a captured ISIS fighter, described daily life as solitary and militant, with strict caution in speech and strong group norms for security. He viewed capture as worse than death, criticised non-Muslims in the US, sought refuge in ISIS-held Syria, and praised Abu Huraira, a US ISIS fighter, for killing over 250 Syrian soldiers.

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
15 February 2021. LADbible, UNILAD. Life As A Spy Inside Al-Qaeda	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Aimean Dean, a former Al-Qaeda member turned Western spy, joined out of a rebellious desire to defend civilians, trained under Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and was influenced by Osama bin Laden. He described indoctrination justifying civilian deaths and noted many recruits were drawn to such groups before joining.
4 November 2009. FRANCE 24. interviews an Al Qaeda militant	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	They claimed bombings were easy despite city security, using widespread resources and suicide bombers. On civilian deaths, they echoed Aimean Dean's account, framing casualties as unavoidable and predetermined by Allah if people obstructed their goals.
3 May 2011. CNN. Osama Bin Laden declares jihad in 1997 CNN interview	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Bin Laden justified their mission by condemning U.S. actions in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and its occupation of Arabia, calling it the holiest Muslim land. He stated that while American civilians were not targeted, non-Muslims must leave Arabia.
22 June 2009. Al Jazeera. Exclusive interview with al-Qaeda third in command	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Mustafa Abu-Yazeed stated their mission is to seek happiness for all humanity and offered a truce if the U.S. meets conditions like leaving Muslim nations, stopping support for Israel, and releasing prisoners. He urged Muslims to continue supporting the Jihad.

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5 September 2021. LADbible. I Lived In A Jihadist Camp In Afghanistan	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Manwar Ali joined Al-Qaeda, believing talk wouldn't change reality and that fighting was necessary to support the victimised. He didn't see rights for non-Muslims and aimed to promote Jihad over politics. He described the camp as welcoming with strong brotherhood, hared purpose, and a sense of escape. Many who joined Al-Qaeda were already committed to the cause, attracting others to their agenda
1 December 2013. Channel 4 News. Al-Shabaab: Exclusive interview with Sheikh Ali Dhere	Al-Shabaab	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	Sheikh Ali Dhere stated their goal is to free their country, governed by Islamic law, and expel foreign forces. Regarding a Kenyan mall attack, he said it was retaliation after warnings were ignored. He called on all Muslims to support their fight and welcomed anyone who joined. No clear signs of shared norms emerged from the interview.
August 2012. Mushin Hassan. Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of al-Shabab and Somali Youth	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Youth joined al-Shabab due to unemployment and easy pay for low-effort work, pressure to avoid appearing weak, and anger over bombings by UN forces. Many sought revenge and protection after abuses by government soldiers. Joining also offered reputation, identity as defenders of the country and religion, and was framed as a religious duty. Humiliation and victimisation were key factors.

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2018. Micheal Keating and Matt Waldman. War and Peace in Somalia	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	High-ranking Al-Shabaab leaders joined in seeking an Islamic government and opposing foreign forces, often alongside friends. Foot soldiers ranged from teens forced or promised education to adults motivated by defending Islam. Religious beliefs and the promise of brotherhood strongly attracted young men, while many joined with friends for camaraderie. Economic hardship also drove recruitment. Those joining for religious reasons likely showed stronger commitment than those motivated by poverty.
September 2014. Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Most Al-Shabaab recruits joined between ages 15-29 as fighters, motivated by religious beliefs and economic hardship. Nearly all saw Islam as under threat, with anger fuelling their involvement. Some, like Ahmadey Kusow, joined due to marginalisation and lack of livelihood. Peer influence also played a role, as with Abdi, who was persuaded by a friend. Many trusted clan leaders, and stayed because they felt a sense of belonging.
30 December2020. Gabriel Toole. Research Note: Deception, Drugs, and Death: Interviews with survivors of Al-Shabaab's youth recruitment trap in Kenya	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Al-Shabaab recruiters in Kenya commonly used money and manipulation—through friendships, fake romances, and promises of wealth—to lure boys, sometimes after orcibly kidnapping them. New recruits underwent physical training, religious indoctrination and were often given drugs like cocaine and heroin, creating

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
						dependency. Those less committed to Islam were assigned to more dangerous roles. The group combined extremist teachings to enforce norms with drug use to deepen members' physical and mental dependence, strengthening control and commitment.

Sources: Secondary data compiled by the author from media interviews and research reports including CNN (2011, 2018), CBC (2016, 2017), The Intercept (2021), LADbible (2021a), FRANCE 24 (2009), Al Jazeera (2009), LADbible (2021b), Channel 4 (2013), Hassan (2012), Keating & Waldman (2018), Botha & Abdile (2014), and Toole (2020)