EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social Movement Theory Perspectives on Group Mobilisation, Radicalisation, and Violent Extremism —A Rapid Evidence Assessment

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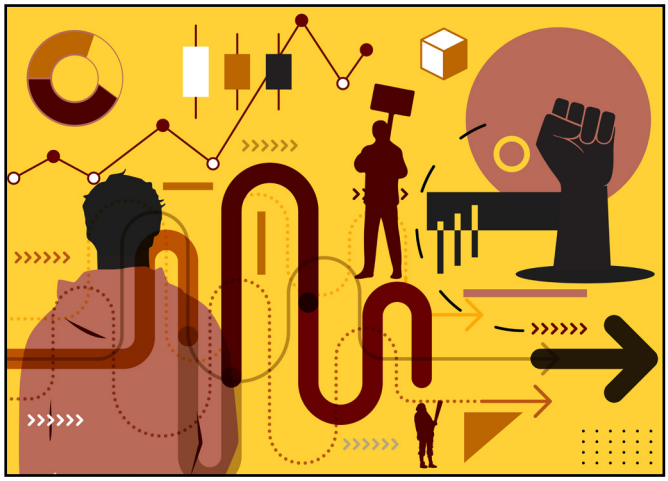
INTRODUCTION

This report synthesises and critically analyses the existing research that has considered whether and how political contention and protest relate to radicalisation and terrorism. It draws on social movement theory perspectives to provide insights into what informs group and mass radicalisation and what constrains them, and what impact state responses have.

AIMS

This review seeks to address the following primary research questions:

1. What factors, features, or events are linked to violence, radicalisation, and terrorism in social movements?
2. What factors, features, or events constrain the potential for violence, radicalisation, and terrorism in social movements?
3. What are the mechanisms that help explain what facilitates or constrains opportunities for violence in social movements?
4. How do different state and policing responses affect the potential for violence and extremism in social movements?



METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a rapid evidence assessment (REA) approach, synthesising knowledge on specific topics in line with the research questions from published journal articles, book chapters, reports, and dissertations, including both academic and "grey" literature (e.g., government and think tank reports). The REA adopted a streamlined methodology using keyword searches of major social science databases, after which identified documents were screened for inclusion based on pre-determined eligibility criteria.

KEY FINDINGS

This REA identifies a number of potential drivers for violent and extremist escalation within social movements, as well as potential factors for de-escalation. The literature reviewed highlights the complex and interacting nature of movement characteristics, mobilisation contexts, and the influence of external actors, namely counter-movements and state responses.

Key findings identified in this review are summarised in a table (See Full Report) for each major section, loosely based on the EMMIE framework for evidence relating to crime prevention interventions (Johnson et al., 2015). The EMMIE framework summarises the overall effect, direction, and strength of the evidence; the mechanisms or mediators it activates; relevant moderators or contexts, including unintended effects; implementation considerations; and economic costs/benefits (Johnson et al., 2015). Since the findings of this review are not solely concerned with interventions, the latter two considerations are not summarised here.

These tables therefore highlight the factors identified, their overall effects on violence and/or extremism, any identified mechanisms and/or moderators, and the strength of the evidence from the literature base. Movements are informed by their socio-historical contexts and internal dynamics, the factors set out in the tables therefore represent general trends in the research rather than firm indicators of movement behaviour. The effects identified below should not, therefore, be interpreted as suggesting a direct causal relationship between a given factor and the likelihood of violence/ extremism, but instead as evidence of how these factors have impacted the dynamics within certain contexts and mobilisations.

Movement characteristics

Different movement characteristics, including factors relating to movement structure, resources, and composition, as well as ideological factors, may contribute to an increased potential for engaging in or rejecting violence. Understanding the characteristics of a given movement is therefore an important first step when understanding how and why violence is produced.

Table 1 (See Full Report) summarises the key findings identified in the literature. Overall, fragmented and decentralised movements, accompanied by spontaneous events, are more likely to lead to bouts of violence, while "radical flanks" – factions that advocate for more disruptive and violent tactics – are both a symptom of fragmentation and are more likely to be violent. Conversely, hierarchical structures and co-operation with moderate organisations or factions may support the de-escalation of violence. While evidence relating to the effects of group ideology is scarce, ideological narratives within groups may become associated with violence. The majority of the research over the past 20 years has primarily focused on far-right mobilisations, which may reflect their increasing prevalence.

Mobilisation contexts

Factors embedded in the wider context around the social movement may contribute to the potential for engaging in or rejecting violence include political and discursive opportunity structures; external factors such as geopolitical, national, or local events; and temporal, geographic, and situational factors that may affect when violence emerges or escalates.

Table 2 (See Full Report) summarises the key findings identified in the literature. Overall, different kinds of opportunities (or a lack thereof), as well as relationships with political parties, can be seen as either accelerators or brakes for violence. Local political events and grievances (e.g., migration, national political issues, and equality) are more likely to precipitate violence than international issues. Protest events linked to elections appear to be particularly associated with violence. Spatially, violent disorder tends to concentrate in large urban areas, and violent protests may diffuse on both a national and international level. Social inequalities and segregation are also strongly associated with political violence.

Overall, social movements are dynamic and relational; levels of violence, as well as opportunities and constraints and their effects change over time. While violence tends to increase with the duration of the movement, violence itself may ultimately lead to demobilisation.

Counter-movements and state responses

Two key external actors and influences that may contribute to the potential for engaging in or rejecting violence identified in the literature are counter-movements and state responses. This includes interactions with both

types of actors, their impact, and potential unintended consequences.

Table 3 (see Full Report) summarises the key factors identified in relation to counter-movements and state responses, and their effect on violence. Overall, both counter-movements and repressive state responses have been found to increase violence, whilst also raising human rights concerns. Legislative and criminal justice approaches yield mixed results, with targeted arrests sometimes effective in demobilising violent movements. De-escalatory or conciliatory approaches may reduce violence, particularly focusing on facilitating safe protest. 'Soft' and non-coercive tactics, including the involvement of non-state actors, have mixed effects; stigmatisation of extremist groups may reduce violence, but counter-messaging can provoke backlash. Findings from the general literature on 'target hardening' may also be applicable to reduce the risks to specific targets.

In addition, state responses can lead to unintended consequences, including reducing opportunities for lawful non-violent protest, mental health impacts, and impacts on public and international support. The literature therefore highlights the importance of avoiding the stigmatisation and securitisation of legitimate forms of protest, particularly given the disproportionate impact that repressive measures can have on minoritised communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this review raise some important considerations relating to movement characteristics, mobilisation contexts, and the relational impact of counter-movements and state responses. Importantly, the findings highlight that specific factors alone do not escalate or de-escalate violence, but rather, a combination of these dynamic and relational factors can influence escalation and de-escalation over time.

Based on this review, recommendations for policy and practice include:

1. Considering the factors that may indicate increased risk of violence within social movements and their contexts to facilitate planning of preventative measures.
2. Identifying "risky" events (e.g., elections) to plan preventative measures.
3. Facilitating non-violent political opportunities and reducing injustice grievances to mitigate potential violence.
4. Avoiding repressive policing and militarised tactics associated with escalating violence.
5. Adopting de-escalatory approaches that facilitate safe protests.
6. Considering involving civil society actors, appealing to moderate voices, and supporting "target hardening" of at-risk locations.
7. Evaluating the impact of de-escalatory and 'soft' or non-coercive approaches.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary taken from the Full Report: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/radical-contention

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