Terörizm ve Radikalleşme Araştırmaları Dergisi
Journal of Terrorism and Radicalization Studies

Haziran 2025, Cilt: 4, Sayı: 2, ss. 156-164

June 2025, Volume: 4, Issue: 2, pp. 156-164

ISSN 2792-0518 (Basılı/Print) **ISSN 2822-2334 (Çevrimiçi/Online)**

Makaleye ait Bilgiler / Article Information

Söyleşi / Interview

Makalenin Başlığı / Article Title

Interview with Dr. John Horgan: Complicated Factors of Individuals' Engagement in and Disengagement from Terrorism

Dr. John Horgan ile Söyleşi: Bireylerin Terörizme Katılımı ve Terörden Uzaklaşmasının Karmaşık Faktörleri

Yazar(lar) / Writer(s)

TRAD

Atıf Bilgisi / Citation:

TRAD. (2025). Interview with Dr. John Horgan: Complicated Factors of Individuals' Engagement in and Disengagement from Terrorism. *Journal of Terrorism and Radicalization Studies*, 4(2), pp. 156-164

TRAD. (2025). Dr. John Horgan ile Söyleşi: Bireylerin Terörizme Katılımı ve Terörden Uzaklaşmasının Karmaşık Faktörleri. *Terörizm ve Radikalleşme Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 4(2), ss. 156-164

Terörizm ve Radikalleşme ile Mücadele Araştırma Merkezi Derneği

Research Center for Defense Against Terrorism and Radicalization Association

Adres/Address: Beytepe Mah. Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Bulvarı

5387. Cadde No:15A D:58

06800 Çankaya/Ankara

www.tradergisi.com

e-posta/e-mail: editortrad@teram.org

INTERVIEW WITH DR. JOHN HORGAN: COMPLICATED FACTORS OF INDIVIDUALS' ENGAGEMENT IN AND DISENGAGEMENT FROM TERRORISM

ABSTRACT

John Horgan is Distinguished University Professor at Georgia State University's Department of Psychology. A psychologist by training, his research focuses on terrorist behavior. His work is widely published, with his critically acclaimed book, 'The Psychology of Terrorism' available in over a dozen languages worldwide. Dr. Horgan's research focuses on psychological issues in terrorism and political violence. He is especially interested in understandings the processes through which people become involved in and disengage from terrorism, as well as the psychological mechanisms through which people cope with involvement in terrorist activity. His current projects involve the development of interventions to counter terrorist recruitment. In May of 2025, Dr. Horgan received the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award. His most recent book is Terrorist Minds: The Psychology of Violent Extremism from al Qaeda to the Far Right, published by Columbia University Press.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Terrorist, Psychology, Process, Pathway, Profile.*

TRAD: Professor, thank you for accepting the interview request from the Journal of Terrorism and Radicalization Studies (TRAD). We see that you have a very broad perspective on terrorism and that you have produced many publications about terrorism and political violence. In this context, our first question will be about your precious book 'The Psychology of Terrorism', which has been translated into many languages. I would like to ask you the questions in the introduction of this book, which I assume is the result of a very long and arduous work. How and why does someone become a terrorist? Are there common causes? Is there a terrorist personality? If you were to briefly answer a very long topic, how would you answer these questions?

Dr. John Horgan: Thanks for having me here! Well, once upon a time we used to think that to be a terrorist, you needed to be mad. And we were wrong. We eventually came to realize that these were (for the most part) people making rational decisions about what they wanted to do. But the violence associated with terrorism often makes it hard for us to accept that it's not the product of warped minds. In reality, when someone becomes involved in terrorism, it's typically the result of a process that people gradually work their way through, either on their own, or with help.

We also used to think that there might be a simple profile, or personality type. And we were wrong about that too. Terrorists are mostly young, angry

men who want to fight against what they view as some gross injustice, on behalf of a wider people or community. But today's terrorists are quite diverse. Men, women, adolescents, even children, from all backgrounds, all ages, all different kinds of lifestyles and prior experiences, now have multiple opportunities to be involved in terrorism. If anything, diversity is the new terrorist profile. What involvement looks like and feels like tends to vary from person to person. Even in the smallest of movements, there's a variety of roles, tasks, jobs to be done, and so, there are different opportunities open to people who might be suited to different kinds of involvement.

There isn't one single pathway to terrorism, nor is the experience of 'being a terrorist' the same from person to person. People experience it in different ways, and as a result, are affected by their involvement in different ways. Even within a specific terrorist group, there tends to be a few different routes or pathways in. Some people must do research and find ways in from afar. Others are simply at the right place at the right time and take advantage of whatever local opportunities present themselves.

Terrorism is a strategy used by a wide variety of actors, groups and movements today, so it stands to reason there would be lots of different ways in which someone could get involved. And like I say, it also tends to be a gradual process. Nobody becomes a terrorist overnight. It involves working through a whole range of social and psychological issues. Sometimes people do all this in isolation. Other times people do this with the help of friends, or a recruiter, or with the help of online content of some kind. We now that getting involved in terrorism can come at an enormous cost to oneself or family.

For some people, though, getting involved is just a rite of passage. If you live in a community facing conflict on a daily basis, it may well be that you have some near or distant family members already involved. It's almost like it's something you are expected to do when you reach a certain age – for someone in that kind of context, getting involved just seems like a perfectly normal thing to do. It's also the case that some people get involved in terrorism because they are initially motivated by ideological issues or some shared grievance.

Many people get involved purely for social reasons, because they are in search of excitement, company, camaraderie or something else. But for those people, for whom ideology isn't the main driver, at least some of them might become more ideological the more time they spend in a movement. Nobody is motivated to become a terrorist because of one factor alone. It's typically a mix of ideological and non-ideological reasons, both public and private.

These specific factors, and their dynamics, vary a lot between different types of group, place and context. Across the ideological spectrum, terrorists have several features in common. They are motivated by moral outrage at some injustice. They identify with the plight of a bigger, wider community that they feel are victimized by some other entity, like a government. They view violence as a legitimate, necessary, and urgent response. All terrorists believe that their actions will help bring about a better future for themselves and for the community they claim to represent. I know I've said a lot here, but I promise that's a very brief answer to several big questions!

TRAD: As one of the academics who know this subject best, the second question we will ask you is about disengagement from terrorist organizations. How and why people leave terrorism and terrorist activity? Regardless of an individual's motivation, is it possible for them to join a terrorist organization, participate in the terrorist acts, and then leave that organization? In your words, is it possible to walk away from terrorism? And more importantly, is it really possible for terrorists to integrate into society and daily life?

Dr. John Horgan: In a word, yes. This is an area on which there's quite a lot of very good research now. Just as there are multiple pathways into a movement, there are also multiple pathways out. Regardless of what motivated someone to get involved, whether they were ideologically driven or motivated by friends and family, just about anyone at any level can decide they want to disengage, or leave terrorism behind.

People leave for lots of reasons. Sometimes it's because involvement is not quite what they imagined. They may be disillusioned at their new day-to-day reality. Jealousy, competition, personal rivalries happen in terrorist movements just like they do in any group or organization. Disillusionment is a very common theme in accounts of why people leave. Mind you, there are also people who have a very good time as terrorists – they enjoy it. It ends

up being everything they ever imagined it could be. We just don't know a lot about them. But overall, yes, it's very possible for people to walk away from terrorism. Some do it voluntarily, while others leave involuntarily, because they may have been caught or otherwise incapacitated through counter-terrorism action. And reintegration is certainly possible. There are many former terrorists who quietly re-enter the society they once claimed to hate. It's a lot easier to re-integrate when you have support, whether through opportunities, or some social structure to help you navigate that re-entry. For anyone who leaves terrorism behind, there are lots of obstacles and challenges to face on that journey, but it is possible.

TRAD: Professor Horgan, another question we have is about lone actor terrorism. When we examine your article titled 'Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists', which you prepared together with a few academics, we understood that, so many lone-actor terrorists were socially isolated. How do you define lone actor terrorism? We see that the majority of the Lone Actor terrorists are men. What could be the reason for this? Another observation we made is that the majority of lone actor terrorists committed their acts of terrorism with religious motivation. Is this correct? If so, what are the reasons for this? Could it be easier for lone actor terrorists to distance themselves from terrorism than for terrorists who have participated in organizational terrorism?

Dr. John Horgan: When we talk about lone actors we don't really mean people who are 'alone'. We're talking about people who take action not necessarily directed or shaped by the terrorist movement itself. These are people who are obviously influenced by a particular cause, grievance, or ideology, but they take it upon themselves to act independently of the movement.

The term 'lone actor' is misleading because in an age where social media can inspire and sustain terrorism, nobody is ever truly alone. But the term emerged as a way to distinguish those people who didn't seem to *belong* to an organization or movement in any formal sense. I would add that just about any movement can have lone actors, not just religiously motivated groups. It's not the ideology that determines how such strategies are deployed. Sometimes movements will call on lone actors to mobilize because, as in the case of the late stages of the Islamic State movement, it

became harder for westerners to travel to ISIS territory undetected. So instead, ISIS put effort into inspiring people to act out at home, where they might (at least in theory) have a much greater chance of successfully executing a violent act. So, the use of lone actors, or the promotion of lone actors, is as much a strategic choice as anything else. It's not easier for lone actor terrorists to distance themselves from terrorism. The whole point of terrorism is that the world knows that you did it, and you did it on behalf of a cause, or a movement.

And, interestingly, lone actors are often far quicker than group-based actors to leak their intentions to those around them. We don't quite understand what may be causing this, but group-based actors on the whole tend to be better at concealing their intent. Maybe that's because of training. We just don't know.

TRAD: Professor, in one of your articles 'Deradicalization or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation' you argue that the concept of deradicalization should be distinguished from disengagement. Could you please explain the differences between these two concepts?

Dr. John Horgan: Of course. These are related but distinct concepts. Disengagement simply means stopping terrorist activity. Or, put another way, leaving terrorism behind. What I realized early on in my research was that you can disengage from terrorism, but you may or may not have had a change of views. So, on the one hand, you can have people who disengage from terrorism and have abandoned the ideology, or their support for the movement. We could say that those people are disengaged and de-radicalized. But alternatively, someone can leave terrorism behind while still maintaining their ideological commitment. So, those could be described as disengaged but *not* de-radicalized. It's also possible of course for people to be de-radicalized but not disengaged. There are many disillusioned people in terrorist groups who just don't have the opportunity to get out.

TRAD: Dr Horgan, what makes a terrorist stop being a terrorist? Is there an easy recipt to answer this question?

Dr. John Horgan: I wouldn't say there's an easy recipe, but it's not as complicated as we might think. It's a lot easier to understand why people get out of terrorism than why they get in. People either stop of their own accord,

or they stop because they are forced to. We could say that disengagement can be voluntary or involuntary. Involuntary disengagement might be when someone is caught or captured, so they have no choice but to disengage. We are still trying to learn more about the reasons people voluntarily stop, but so far, the research suggests that disillusionment is a very common theme. In simple terms, they just don't feel like being involved any more. We need to do a lot more research to verify just how widespread disillusionment is among all those who disengage, but the people who disengage and are willing to talk to researchers like me tend to share accounts that suggest they've become deeply disillusioned with some part of their lives as terrorists. It may be that they just don't believe in the cause anymore, or that they are burned out from the lifestyle.

Sometimes, it's just because they are fed up, bored, and want to do something else with the rest of their lives. Like I say, it's often not as complicated as we think. But so far the research on disengagement has been very promising. We must do a lot more work on this topic because it has such practical relevance for counterterrorism. If we know more about the causes of disengagement, we might be able to do something more pro-active to either stop people getting involved in the first place, or to facilitate exit for people who are already involved.

TRAD: What are the factors that psychologically draw individuals to terrorist organizations? Are individuals aware that when they join a terrorist organization, they will be involved in acts of violence and that other people may die or be injured as a result? In light of all this information, why do individuals join terrorist organizations?

Dr. John Horgan: That's a great question. Although I've studied terrorist psychology for a long time now, I struggle to give an easy answer. First, not everyone who wants to join a terrorist movement does so because they want to do violence. There's a role for everyone, especially in some of the bigger movements. Some want to be involved in the action, or at least they think they do. Others just want to help out in some way. They absolutely want to be involved, but just not involved in committing violent acts. They might be involved in training or fundraising or something else.

Believe it or not, but the people who do the violence for terrorist movements are actually few and far between. Terrorist organizations are

made up of lots of different people who occupy lots of different roles. Sometimes a person can hold multiple roles, and people will often move from one kind of role into another, depending on what the organizational needs are, or if the person seems to have a particular skill that might make them especially valuable in some way. As to why people join terrorist groups, well, there's no one single factor that causes this. It's typically a mix of big reasons and little reasons, or public reasons and private reasons. Yes, it's a story about the role of ideology, the cause that resonates with someone, that urge to want to fight back on behalf of a community. But it's also a story about what's going on in someone's own life, how they think and feel about it. It's about the lure of feeling part of something bigger that oneself, but it's also about the feeling one gets of being in a group of people who think and feel the same way as you to. It's a place to belong. It's a way to get revenge against one's enemies. There's a sense of adventure, excitement, purpose, status, power. It varies somewhat from person to person, but it's typically a mix of different factors.

TRAD: We know that many countries have implemented various deradicalization programs. We also know that states and communities such as the European Union have allocated large amounts of resources for these programs. How effective do you think the deradicalization programs have been? How accurate is it to claim that individuals who have gone through these programs will not engage in violent acts again? For example, is it possible to integrate into society those who have been members of a terrorist organization for 40 years, who have operated in various positions from militancy to management, and who have given orders for terrorist acts, through deradicalization programs?

Dr. John Horgan: Well, I guess what I would say is that it doesn't matter what I think. What matters is whether the evidence suggests these programs are effective. I wish I could say that evidence existed. A challenge of these programs is that quite frankly, we don't know that they work, nor do we know if the ones that seem to work, works for the reasons they suggest.

We need rigorous, scientific, and independent evaluations of these programs, and we just don't see much interest in entertaining such evaluations. So, to answers your question, do they work? Some do, many don't. But of the ones that are effective, they often work for reasons that have nothing to do with the actual programs. For instance, we know (for

reasons we still don't quite understand) that terrorist recidivism is very low, much lower than rates for non-terrorist crimes. It's often the case that terrorist deradicalization programs claim credit for outcomes that would have happened irrespective of whether the program existed. But there's still far too much speculation around what constitutes a successful program and why. We need a lot more research here.

TRAD: Dr. Horgan, we read that you interviewed a lot of terrorists in your research. Do you have any difficulties while and before interviewing terrorists? What was the most interesting thing you came across during your interviews? What is your general impression about terrorists as a result of these interviews?

Dr. John Horgan: I wouldn't say I've interviewed a *lot*. It felt like a lot at one time, but I am constantly trying to find more people to interview about their experiences. Even now, as I am researching for a new book, I'm working hard to find people who could be interviewed. And it's not easy. Ideally, as the researcher Jeff Victoroff recommends, if we are to be systematic about developing a psychology of terrorist behavior, we would need to interview people at all levels of a terrorist movement, to try to analyze accounts according to their roles, and levels of commitment. But I would say that interviewing really is an under-used tool in our arsenal. Interviewing is hard because it's just not easy to find many people who are willing to be interviewed about their experiences in terrorist movements. Some researchers travel to conflict zones to do this, while others can access prison populations.

It's sometimes possible to access former terrorists after they are released from prison, but many former terrorists just want to get on with their lives and not have to relive their experiences for a researcher. I understand that, especially because I've seen examples of researchers doing very irresponsible and unprofessional things during interviews. Just because a researcher has access to terrorists, doesn't mean they know how to conduct a proper interview. So, for many reasons, doing interviews, or rather, *relying* on interviews as a primary source of data, is often just not very practical. It can be very, very time consuming to even set up these interviews, and it can take years to finally access a particular person or group. There's no clear recipe for success here, but when we can get access, it's very important to use rigorous, scientific methods to collect our data. There are so many

factors to consider. Is the researcher relying on gatekeepers to find interviewees for them? Will the terrorist organization provide their own translator? Will the organization choose people *they* feel will give an interview that is sympathetic to their movement? So going into an interview with a very careful plan of action, knowing your subject, and being willing to listen while subtly knowing how and when to gently direct the conversation, are all very important elements for successful interviews. The general impression I've gotten from the interviews I've done is that people are willing to talk and are willing to offer frank and open accounts of what they did and why (in their minds) they did what they did. I think that in itself is surprising! But from my experience so far, I think the role of a good interviewer is really about learning to shut up and listen.

TRAD: Dr. Horgan, thank you for answering our questions. Is there anything you would like to add?

Dr. John Horgan: Thank you for asking. I have to take advantage of the opportunity to highlight my recent book, *Terrorist Minds.* If any of your readers want to learn more about terrorist psychology, please do check it out. And thanks for the opportunity to talk about the work!