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Beyond Organisational Convergence: Comparing Social Learning and Moral Neutralisation in Criminal and Terrorist Behaviour

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Abstract

This article examines whether organised crime and terrorism should be understood as behaviourally distinct forms of illegal violence or as activities shaped by shared social and cognitive mechanisms. While the crime–terror continuum usefully explains how criminal and terrorist groups may cooperate, exchange resources, adopt similar techniques, and develop hybrid characteristics, it does not fully explain how individuals come to participate in violence. Drawing on social learning theory, neutralisation theory, and moral disengagement, this theory-guided integrative review compares organised criminal and terrorist behaviour. It argues that both may involve differential association, favourable definitions, learned skills, social reinforcement, and mechanisms that neutralise moral restraints. However, these similarities do not establish equivalence. Terrorist ideology can collectivise grievance, construct victims as representatives of a hostile category, frame violence as political communication, and present participation as sacrifice for a higher cause. Organised criminal violence, by contrast, is more commonly associated with material benefit, market governance, reputation, and organisational survival, although mixed motives and political entanglements complicate this distinction. The article concludes that criminological theories can explain important behavioural mechanisms in both forms of violence, but must be integrated with political and terrorism studies to explain ideology, conflict, strategic communication, and state action. It recommends matched empirical comparisons of organised-crime and terrorist offenders to test the proposed mechanisms.

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Introduction

Traditionally, organised crime and terrorism have been treated as separate security problems, as organised criminal groups are linked to profit, illegal markets, corruption, and the safeguarding of illicit enterprises, while terrorist organisations are associated with political or ideological violence aimed at influencing audiences beyond their immediate victims (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). But in practice, the distinction is not always clear. Terrorist groups may participate in trafficking, robbery, extortion, kidnapping, forgery and money laundering, whereas criminal organisations may resort to intimidation, spectacular violence and political influence to protect their operations (Hutchinson & O'Malley, 2007). The United

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Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime defines organised criminal groups as structured groups that act over a period of time to commit serious offences for direct, financial or other material benefit (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019).

An influential framework, the crime-terror continuum (Makarenko, 2004) helped to understand the overlap between organised crime and terrorism. It conceptualised their relationship as a continuum of alliances, operational motivations, convergence and the 'black hole' syndrome - conditions where weak or failed states facilitate the convergence of criminal and terrorist activity. The framework was developed in response to post–Cold War changes, most notably the reduced access of some terrorist groups to state sponsorship and the increasing importance of criminal activity as a source of revenue (Makarenko, 2004). Refinements to the nexus have been made in subsequent work by looking at coexistence, alliances, competition, tactical adaptation, organisational transformation, and hybrid actors. The research cautions that the terrorist-criminal divide can mask mixed motives and local political affiliations (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021).

In spite of these advances, however, the literature on nexus is still very much organisation-oriented. The common question is whether criminal and terrorist groups cooperate, imitate, exchange resources or converge. This focus fails to take into account fully how participants learn illegal conduct, develop favourable attitudes toward violence, receive social rewards for participation, or overcome moral proscriptions against harming others.

The organisational question, how do criminal and terrorist entities intersect? is therefore different from the behavioural question: through what social and cognitive processes do individuals participate in and sustain criminal or terrorist violence?

This article addresses the latter question through two complementary criminological perspectives: social learning theory and moral neutralisation. Its central research question is: How do social learning and moral neutralisation operate in organised criminal and terrorist behaviour, and how does ideological framing differentiate the two forms of offending? The article argues that criminal and terrorist violence can rely on similar mechanisms of association, learning, reinforcement and justification. Ideology, however, changes the content and social meaning of these mechanisms by relating violence to a political audience, a collective grievance, an identity, and an allegedly higher cause. This does not produce either complete separation or behavioural equivalence, but shared mechanisms working within different normative and strategic projects.

From Continuum to Behaviour

The crime–terror nexus is useful in that it does not depend on fixed institutional categories. Criminal and terrorist actors can co-exist without meaningful cooperation, exchange services, appropriate each other’s methods, or slowly combine political and commercial activities. Today’s research suggests that competition and failed cooperation may be as important as successful alliances. For example, Omelicheva and Markowitz (2021) show how convergence can be promoted or inhibited by local political economies, resource structures (access to weapons, drugs, funding, etc.), identities and state involvement. Their work challenges the

assumption that the presence of illicit markets and militant actors will naturally lead to sustainable collaboration.

But organisational convergence must not be conflated with behavioural similarity. Groups may seek similar ends by similar means, while individuals in a group may participate for different reasons (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). Crime might be seen by terrorist leaders as a way to fund political struggle, and individual recruits could be motivated by material incentives, friendship, status, protection, revenge, or adventure (Schils & Verhage, 2017). Similarly, organised criminal groups may not seek political transformation, but bribe officials or use terror-like violence to protect their interests. So the ideological versus profit split is analytically useful only if it is seen as a tendency, not an absolute division.

Studies show that for some individuals, connections exist between everyday crime and extremism. For example, Basra and Neumann's (2016) study looked at 79 European jihadists who had criminal pasts. It found four common links: jihadism might offer a way to make up for past actions or justify continued offending; prisons can be places where extremists meet and form networks; criminal experience can provide access to weapons, help with fake documents, and familiarity with violence; and common crimes can fund extremist activities. This doesn't mean that being a conventional criminal will always lead to terrorism. Instead, it suggests that the skills, identities, connections, and justifications learned through crime can be applied in an extremist context.

A behavioural approach therefore adds to the continuum by focussing on different processes, namely those by which actors learn what to do, with whom to associate, which rewards are worth pursuing, who may legitimately be harmed, and how responsibility is interpreted. Learning is the process by which an actor acquires knowledge and skills and maintains them; moral neutralisation is the process by which an actor neutralises the prohibited nature of an act, thus making it congruent with a tolerable moral self-image. Both theories together explain why operational similarities occur while political, organisational, and moral differences are retained.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning

Social learning theory postulates that criminal behaviour is acquired and maintained through interaction as opposed to stable personality traits. Its four main elements are differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Akers & Silverman, 2004). Differential association is learning from the individuals and groups who associate with or approve of criminal activity. Definitions are attitudes and perceptions that depict illegality as an acceptable, appropriate, or desirable course of action. Differential reinforcement is the reward or punishment expectation, whereas imitation is the replication of the actions of those who are actively or vicariously interacted with.

The theory is well-established within criminology; however, there is varying support for its components. A meta-analysis by Pratt et al. (2010) found mostly strong links between offending, differential association, and pro-criminal definitions, but weaker relationships for

reinforcement and imitation. This nuance is important, as social learning should not be thought of as a catch-all phrase for all violence to be learned; its propositions must be untangled and taken separately.

Membership in organised crime groups and gangs can facilitate access to illicit activities, technical expertise, protective networks, social standing, and belief systems that legitimise criminal behaviour. Individuals within these groups may acquire skills in surveillance, smuggling, coercion, fraudulent practices, weaponry, and evading law enforcement. Potential benefits derived from participation can encompass financial gain, elevated prestige, group cohesion, heightened stimulation, and enhanced personal security. Consequently, empirical research on gangs has substantiated the significant relevance of differential association and social learning theories in understanding these phenomena.

Akers and Silverman (2004) applied social learning theory to terrorism by hypothesising that terrorist acts are acquired and sustained through the same mechanisms as other crimes. Radical networks provide identity, ideological narratives, resources, and definitions to facilitate political violence as a lucrative and rewarding activity. Friends, relatives, celebrities, prison contacts, and online digital spaces could influence an individual towards embracing violence as a form of expression. However, the pathways to violent extremism are multidimensional, unique, and varied depending on an individual's ideological beliefs, as well as the type of offenders and their characteristics. Using qualitative case studies of hate-crime and terrorist offenders, Mills et al. (2021) found both similarities and differences in their pathways and proposed an integrated social control - social learning explanation of radicalisation and extremist violence.

Social learning thus provides a mechanism rather than a determinate sequence. Exposure does not entail adoption, and ideological agreement need not lead to violence. Systematic evidence differentiates between cognitive radicalisation – that is, radical attitudes and intentions – and behavioural radicalisation – engagement in radical or violent behaviour – and shows that risk factors vary in their association with these outcomes (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). The analytical task is therefore to explain when social associations and favourable definitions translate into action, and what forms of reinforcement sustain it.

Moral Neutralization

The neutralisation theory of Sykes and Matza (1957) assumes that offenders do not necessarily deny the morality of the law. Rather, they temporarily lift the restraining force of moral norms by means of learned vocabularies of justification. Five techniques exist: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. These techniques allow wrongdoers to reframe wrongdoing while maintaining a defensible self- image (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Neutralisation, however, is conceptually related but different from Bandura's theory of moral disengagement. Bandura (1999) provides comprehensive insight into how individuals may "disengage" moral self-sanctions through such mechanisms as moral justification, euphemistic minimisation, advantageous comparison, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, justification by dehumanisation, and attribution of blame. In this article,

neutralisation is used as an overarching concept, while the distinction is noteworthy: Sykes and Matza (1957) emphasise the learned techniques in justification of crime, whereas Bandura (1999) focuses on the cognitive processes that underpin moral disengagement in criminality.

To the organised criminal, violence can be neutralised as necessary business, retaliation, enforcement, protection of associates, or punishment of a purportedly deserving victim. This is achieved by spreading responsibility through hierarchical orders and specialised jobs. Victims may be labelled as suspects or shown to be involved in illicit markets. Corrupt authorities may condemn the condemners; loyalty to family, a neighbourhood, a gang, or an organisation may override duties to the law.

Terrorist narratives can utilise mechanisms that promote moral disengagement and increase violence's collective and ideological content. Violence can be presented as defence of the oppressed community, revenge, obedience to a sacred law, or sacrifice for national liberation. Civilian victims can be portrayed as non-innocent, dehumanised, or as members of a hostile collective, and the responsibility can be attributed to the leaders, enemies, historical forces, or God (Bandura, 1999). A comparative content analysis of 367 communiqués issued by Colombian guerrilla and paramilitary groups found that attribution of blame, euphemisms, moral justification, and dehumanisation of opponents are frequently used (Villegas de Posada et al., 2018). Similarly, a content analysis of terrorist leaders' speeches by Jaysh al-Adl found that condemning those who condemn and denying responsibility are the most frequent neutralisation techniques, although the distribution can vary in different cases (Yousefi & Akbari, 2026).

Moral justification is especially significant because it not only justifies violence retrospectively; it can redefine violence as morally virtuous in advance of it. Experimental research across culturally distinct samples found that social alienation predicted support for political violence through moral justification (Jasko et al., 2017). But ideological commitment alone cannot explain participation in political violence. The research on the Provisional Irish Republican Army found that participants and non-participants could share political identities, grievances, experiences of conflict and ideological frames while differing in their willingness to breach a "moral wall" by killing or dying for the cause (Bosi et al., 2025). Moral neutralisation should therefore be seen as a facilitating process rather than an automatic consequence of extremist belief.

Method

This article is a theory-guided integrative review. Integrative reviews are appropriate when the research problem requires the synthesis of empirical, theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative sources, rather than statistical aggregation alone (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). This approach also aligns with Snyder's (2019) view of the literature review as a research methodology that involves a clear purpose, search strategy, selection criteria, and analytical synthesis.

The review is limited to English-language cross-national literature on organised or group-based criminal offending, terrorism, violent extremism, the crime-terror nexus, social learning, neutralisation and moral disengagement. The theories are defined by incorporating basic works published before 2004 where appropriate. Most of the substantive nexus literature is from 2004 to 2026, beginning with Makarenko's continuum. Search combinations include crime-terror nexus, organised crime and terrorism, social learning and terrorism, differential association and radicalisation, neutralisation and terrorism, moral disengagement and political violence, and criminal pathways to terrorism.

Sources are included in the present article if they contribute: (a) a theoretical application relevant to criminal or terrorist conduct; (b) empirical evidence on learning, association, reinforcement, justification, or disengagement; (c) a direct comparison between offender categories; or (d) major conceptual revision of the crime-terror nexus. Purely descriptive commentaries and sources that claim similarity but provide no evidence of behavioural overlap were excluded from the core analysis. The synthesis uses a deductive comparison organised around association, definitions, imitation, reinforcement, denial of responsibility, denial of injury or victimhood, condemnation of condemners, higher loyalties, moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanisation, and victim-blaming.

This design has limitations. It does not provide original interviews, criminal records, or causal estimates. Publicly available terrorist cases overrepresent detected, prosecuted, and high-profile actors, while official documents may reproduce institutional assumptions. "Organised crime" and "terrorism" also vary across legal and national settings. The analysis consequently identifies plausible comparative mechanisms and theoretical patterns; it does not construct a universal offender profile or claim that all criminal and terrorist pathways are alike.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative framework presented in Figure 1 shows how shared learning and neutralisation mechanisms can coexist with divergent organisational framing and strategic ends.

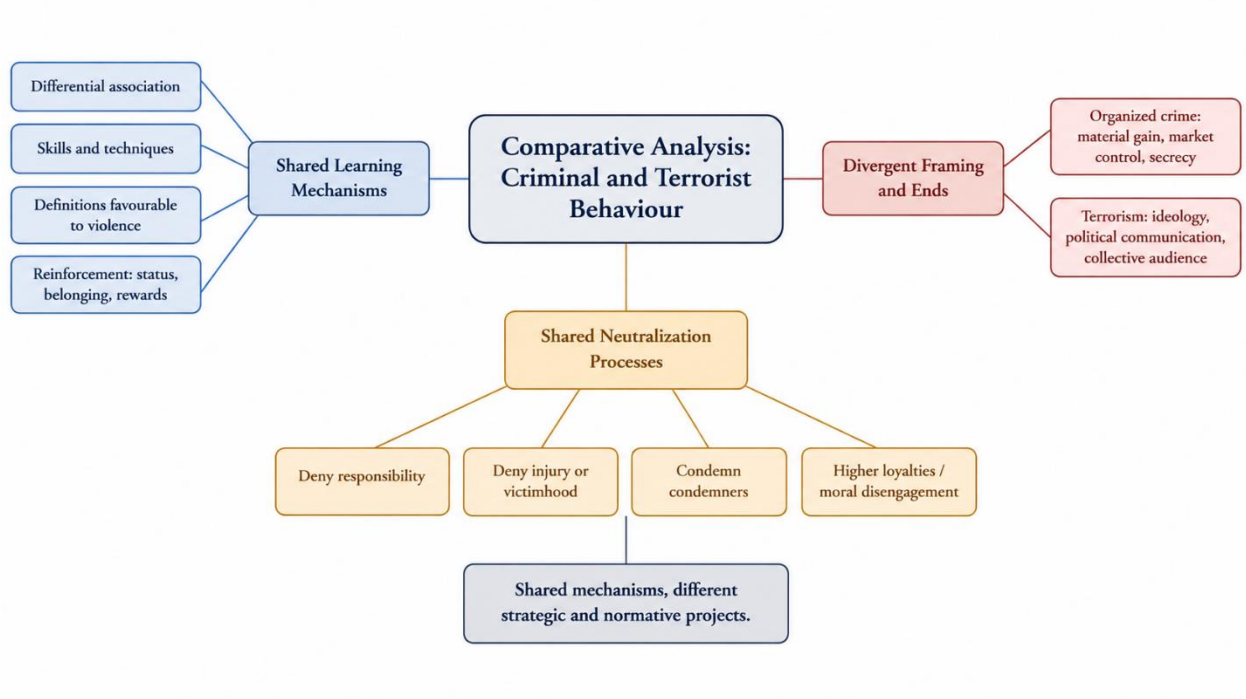

Figure 1. Comparative Framework of Criminal and Terrorist Behaviour

(Note: Developed by the author based on the social-learning and moral-neutralisation framework used in this study.)

Shared Learning Mechanisms

Most evident is the overlap in differential association. Organised criminal and terrorist behaviour, though not exclusively, takes place in a relational context of opportunity, knowledge, approval and identity. Family ties, peer groups, gangs, prison networks, local communities and online forums are opportunities for interaction; the content can be different, but the process is familiar: long-term exposure to significant others can change what is seen as normative, likely, desirable and justifiable.

Both settings also require the learning of techniques and definitions. Criminal networks can pass on market knowledge, fraud methods, coercive practices, weapons access, and techniques to avoid detection. Terrorist networks may pass on clandestine communication, surveillance, attack planning, weapons use, propaganda, and security practices using similar social-learning processes (Akers & Silverman, 2004). Basra and Neumann's (2016) findings suggest that criminal experience can reduce the practical gap between willingness and capability by providing transferable skills, access to weapons and forged documents, and familiarity with violence. Terrorist organisations can also attach new ideological definitions to these skills at the same time: conduct previously performed for personal benefit may be redefined as service to a cause (Akers & Silverman, 2004; Basra & Neumann, 2016).

Reinforcement reinforces that connection. Material satisfaction is important, but not sufficient. These include a sense of belonging, status, masculinity, thrill, safety, comradeship, recognition, and career within the organisation. Terrorist groups often provide a moral dimension, along with notions of redemption, heroism, martyrdom, and historical greatness;

organised crime groups may, and often do, create a moral community, but terrorist organisations typically associate that internal reward with a larger political audience and communicative purpose.

Shared Neutralisation Processes

Criminal and terrorist actors may both deny responsibility by citing coercion, orders, social circumstances, or group obligations. They may deny injury by devaluing harm, normalising violence, or citing allegedly greater harms committed by opponents. They may deny the victim by depicting targets as traitors, aggressors, collaborators, exploiters, or legitimate representatives of an enemy category. Condemnation of condemners may direct attention to corrupt police, hypocritical governments, rival groups, or unjust social systems. Appeal to higher loyalties may privilege the demands of associates, family, community, nation, religion, or revolution over general legal obligations (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The resemblance is theoretically significant because it implies that extreme violence does not require a completely abnormal moral psychology. People may retain moral standards while selectively disengaging or rearranging their application. Bandura's (1999) notion of diffusion of responsibility is particularly pertinent in organisations where planning, financing, transport, intelligence, propaganda, and execution are divided between contributors. Functional separation may allow contributors to feel distant from or causally detached from the final harm.

Yet shared neutralisations do not have the same meaning. An organised criminal may depict murder as an unavoidable enforcement required to maintain credibility, while a terrorist may depict an attack as the defence of a community or transmission of a political demand. Both morally reconstruct violence, but terrorist justifications more characteristically evoke a collective audience and political narrative that extends beyond immediate organisational survival. The difference is not the presence or absence of morality, but the social scale and ideological structure through which violence is morally redefined (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021).

Divergent Ends and Audiences

The most critical difference lies in the relationship between the means, ends, and audiences. In the case of ideal-typical organised crime, secrecy shields profitable activities; violence aims at regulating the market, disciplining participants, eliminating rivals, or influencing authorities. Excessive publicity can jeopardise the illicit enterprise (McMahan, 2019). In contrast, terrorism relies on communication, where the immediate victim is not the intended audience, aiming to influence governments, communities, supporters, or the public (Schmid, 2011). Criminal and terrorist groups may employ similar weapons; however, different targets, claims of responsibility, propaganda, and political demands grant divergent strategies (Hutchinson & O'Malley, 2007; Schmid, 2011).

But this contrast must not be overstated. Organised criminals often foster popular fear, political power, or community acceptance and terrorists may hide their money and logistical activity. Groups nowadays can also mix commercial, personal, ideological, and strategic motives. Omelicheva and Markowitz (2021) thus appropriately warn of a hard-core ideology-

profit dichotomy. The more limited analytical point: ideological framing is rather how learned conduct and neutralisation are arranged around a shared identity and political discourse, even if a given actor seeks money or honour.

The comparison can be summarised as shared mechanisms but divergent framing and ends. Social learning explains how actors acquire practices and favourable definitions. Neutralisation and moral disengagement explain how restraints are suspended. Political ideology then specifies a collective grievance, identifies friends and enemies, defines a broader audience, and presents violence as a means of changing or defending a social order. Ideology does not replace criminogenic mechanisms; it reorganises their content.

Implications

The theory has important implications for preventing radicalisation and violence. Firstly, preventative strategies should avoid placing undue reliance on demographic profiling. There is no one cohesive psychological or demographic profile fitting individuals who become involved in terrorism or violent extremism, and demographic factors have limited explanatory power in radicalisation outcomes (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). Consequently, generalised categories may lead to false positives and elide the heterogeneous pathways by which people become radicalised. Prevention strategies should be attentive to shifts in relationships, access to networks capable of facilitating violence, increasing definitions favourable to violence, reinforcement, and the normalisation of harm (Akers & Silverman, 2004).

Second, interventions should distinguish between ideological sympathy and behavioural mobilisation, as exposure to radical material or grievances does not necessarily result in violence – systematic evidence differentiates radical attitudes and intentions from radical behaviours and less than 1% of individuals with radical beliefs, ideas, or opinions are estimated to engage in radical violence (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). A critical transition may also occur when entering networks providing capability and approval, as well as justifications for overcoming moral inhibition (Mills et al., 2021). Programmes addressing violent extremism should therefore work on challenging victim dehumanisation, denial or minimisation of injury, displacement of responsibility, and higher-loyalty claims while creating alternative sources of belonging and status (Bandura, 1999; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Third, criminal justice and counterterrorism institutions require greater coordination, but not conceptual fusion. Criminal experience may provide useful skills and contacts to terrorist networks, particularly in prisons and illicit markets. At the same time, treating every offender as a prospective terrorist would be empirically unjustified and operationally counterproductive. Risk assessment should examine specific pathway indicators rather than criminal history alone.

Finally, the comparison strengthens criminology's contribution to terrorism studies. Terrorism is politically distinctive, but it is not beyond general social mechanisms (Sayed, 2025). Criminological theories can explain parts of the pathway while political science and terrorism studies explain ideology, conflict, state action, and strategic communication. An interdisciplinary explanation is therefore preferable to either reducing terrorism to ordinary crime or presenting terrorists as actors governed by entirely unique processes. General social

processes make essential contributions to understanding its development and persistence, such as association and learning, reinforcement, and moral neutralisation (Akers & Silverman, 2004). At the same time, political science and terrorism studies provide critical insights into ideology, conflict, statecraft, and strategic communication that are relevant to understanding terrorists' intentions and decision-making processes (Sageman, 2017). These considerations highlight the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach for contextualising terrorist activities within broader social change processes while differentiating them from conventional crimes.

Conclusion

The crime-terror continuum theory suggests that organised criminal and terrorist groups could cooperate, borrow from each other, and adopt some hybrid attributes. While its organisational insights retained value, convergence did not fully account for individual participation in illegal violence. The behavioural analysis indicated that organised crime and terror shared similar behaviours such as differential association, definition, skill learning, social approval, and moral neutralisation.

These commonalities did not amount to equivalence, however. Terrorism provided an ideology to collectivise grievances, redefine victims as symbols of enmity, turn violence into a form of political communication, and participation as sacrifice for a greater cause. Organised crime's violent activities would tend to have a more material orientation toward benefit, governance of the market, reputation, or survival, notwithstanding mixed motives and political dimensions. The most valid conclusion was thus not that criminals and terrorists behaved the same way, but rather that analogous social and cognitive processes could drive violence in different strategies and normative frameworks.

Future empirical work should test this proposition through matched comparison of organised criminal and terrorist offenders using court documents, interviews, prison records, digital material and biographical data. Such work should distinguish attitudes from action and individual motives from organisational objectives. Until then, a theory-guided integrative comparison offered a cautious basis for moving beyond organisational convergence towards a more precise criminology of criminal and terrorist behaviour.

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