

The internal brakes on violent escalation—a descriptive typology

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A CREST report by Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook and Graham Macklin

examines why there are often thresholds of violence that members of extremist groups rarely cross.

Why do some 'extremists' or 'extremist groups' choose not to engage in violence, or only in particular forms of violence? Why is it that even in deeply violent groups there are often thresholds of violence that members rarely if ever cross?

The basic premise of this project is to look at the 'internal brakes' on violent escalation: the intra-group mechanisms through which group members themselves contribute to establish and maintain parameters on their own violence.

Such internal brakes are often evident in detailed accounts of decision-making within groups that use or flirt with violence, yet they are rarely examined systematically. The aim of this project was to develop a descriptive typology of the internal brakes on violent escalation that could provide a basis for more systematic analysis of such brakes.

The authors used three very different case studies to construct, test and refine the typology: the transnational and UK jihadi scene from 2005 to 2016; the British extreme right during the 1990s, and the animal liberation movement in the UK from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s.

The typology

The typology is based around five underlying logics on which the internal brakes identified in this project operate:

- Brake 1 – strategic [logic](#): Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action as being as or more effective than more violent alternatives.

- Brake 2 – moral logic: Construction of moral norms and evaluations that inhibit certain forms of violence and the emotional impulses towards violence.
- Brake 3 – logic of ego maintenance: Self-identification as a group that is either nonviolent or uses only limited forms of violence.
- Brake 4 – logic of outgroup definition: Boundary softening in relation to putative out-groups such as opponents, opponents' perceived supporters, the general public or [state actors](#).
- Brake 5 – organisational logic: Organisational developments that either (a) alter the moral and strategic equations in favour of non- or limited violence, (b) institutionalise less violent collective identities and/or processes of boundary softening, and/or (c) reduce the likelihood of unplanned violence.

A number of issues require careful attention if this typology is to be used, as intended, to support evaluation of the threats from and opportunities to inhibit, escalation towards [violence](#), and it is clear that the typology cannot be use as a straightforward checklist.

However, in recent years a growing number of academics have begun to highlight the need for a more detailed understanding of the processes of non- or limited escalation. This typology provides an important step in that direction.

More information: The full CREST report, executive summary and the three case studies: [crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/ ... -brakes-full-report/](http://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/...-brakes-full-report/)

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