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Article

Terrorism and Destructive Cults as Sources of Societal Disruption: Conceptual Delineation for Effective Risk Management

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the conceptual boundary between terrorism and destructive cults as a critical precondition for effective risk management. While terrorism and cultic violence are commonly treated as analytically distinct phenomena, empirical evidence increasingly reveals overlapping organizational structures, leadership dynamics, and escalation pathways. Drawing on a comparative qualitative analysis of cases situated in the grey zone between terrorism and destructive cults, the study demonstrates that rigid classificatory distinctions obscure early warning signals and delay preventive intervention. The findings show that escalation toward outward-facing violence is driven less by ideological labels than by internal organizational dynamics, including charismatic authority, centralized decision-making, social isolation, and ideological absolutism. Destructive cults often generate high levels of latent risk despite limited external violence, while terrorist organizations with cultic characteristics exhibit intensified escalation potential. Hybrid organizations, in particular, demonstrate non-linear trajectories in which violence emerges abruptly without substantial organizational transformation. By reframing conceptual boundaries as tools of risk governance rather than static categories, the article advances a risk-oriented analytical framework that supports early detection and proportionate intervention. The study contributes to debates in terrorism studies, sociology of religion, and security policy by demonstrating that conceptual clarity is not an abstract theoretical concern, but a necessary condition for preventive risk management and effective security governance.



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Terrorism; disaster; destructive cults; risk management; violent extremism; conceptual boundaries.

1. Introduction

The distinction between terrorism and destructive cults has long occupied a central place in academic, legal, and policy debates. Traditionally, terrorism has been conceptualized as a form of politically motivated, outward-facing violence designed to intimidate broader audiences and coerce states or societies, whereas destructive cults have been associated primarily with inward-facing control, psychological manipulation, and harm inflicted upon members rather than external targets (Crenshaw, 2000; Richardson, 2004). While analytically convenient, this binary distinction has proven increasingly inadequate in accounting for empirical realities. Numerous cases demonstrate that organizations commonly classified as destructive cults may develop the capacity for mass violence, while terrorist organizations often display internal dynamics—such as charismatic authority, totalistic control, and social isolation—typically associated with cultic groups (Dawson, 2006; Whitsett & Kent, 2003).

This conceptual ambiguity is not merely a theoretical concern. As scholars of terrorism and political violence have repeatedly emphasized, definitional instability has hindered cumulative research, distorted empirical comparison, and complicated the translation of academic insights into effective public policy (Crenshaw, 2000; Shaya, 2010). The problem becomes particularly acute in contexts of prevention and early intervention, where institutional responses are shaped less by nuanced empirical assessment than by rigid classificatory labels. Organizations tend to be designated as “terrorist” only after the occurrence of outward-facing violence, while destructive cults often remain framed as social or religious anomalies until catastrophic escalation occurs. As a result, preventive measures are frequently delayed, and responses become reactive rather than anticipatory (O’Brien, 2013). Such limitations are closely linked to a reductionist understanding of security itself. As noted in the literature, “today, security, as a multi-layered phenomenon encompassing all spheres of state and social existence, does not represent merely the condition of a subject defined by the absence of endangerment and fear (conflicts, threats, physical violence), but rather an instrumental, autonomous, and indivisible value—a means through which certain goals are achieved and realized. In addition to the state-political and military domains, security also includes social, economic, cultural, moral, and ideological dimensions.” (Milosavljević, 2013:34). Viewed from this broader perspective, rigid post hoc classifications obscure early warning signals and structural vulnerabilities, thereby undermining the very preventive capacity that contemporary security governance seeks to enhance.

Empirical cases illustrate this pattern with striking consistency. Groups such as Aum Shinrikyo, the Peoples Temple, the Order of the Solar Temple, or the Rajneeshee movement were long treated primarily as cultic or religious phenomena, despite exhibiting organizational characteristics associated with elevated risk, including charismatic leadership, internal coercion, isolation from wider society, and escalating ideological rigidity (Richardson, 2004; Dawson, 2006; Fox & Levin, 1998). Conversely, armed movements such as the Lord’s Resistance Army have combined overt political violence with deeply sectarian internal structures, blurring the boundary between terrorism and cultic domination (Crenshaw, 2000; Kruglanski et al., 2009). In each of these cases, institutional classification lagged behind observable warning signals, allowing risks to accumulate until violence reached irreversible thresholds.

The literature has increasingly acknowledged that violence emerging from religious or ideological groups cannot be understood solely through doctrinal content or stated political objectives. Richardson (2004) underscores that religiously framed movements may oscillate between non-violent and violent trajectories depending on organizational dynamics, leadership decisions, and interactions with external authorities. Similarly, Dawson (2006) demonstrates that charismatic authority itself is not inherently pathological but becomes dangerous when legitimacy crises, isolation, and mismanagement of authority converge. These insights suggest that the escalation of violence is bet-

ter understood as a process shaped by structural and relational factors than as a simple outcome of belief or ideology.

At the same time, research on terrorism has highlighted persistent problems of conceptual overstretch and politicization. As Shaya's (2010) historical analysis of anarchist terrorism illustrates, societies have repeatedly struggled to interpret violent threats without projecting cultural anxieties and moral narratives onto offenders. Contemporary debates around terrorism continue to reflect this tendency, as labels often serve symbolic and political functions rather than analytical precision (Crenshaw, 2000). O'Brien's (2013) examination of counterterrorism in Europe further shows how securitization processes generate fragmented and sometimes contradictory policy responses, producing incoherent security practices. Within such environments, misclassification itself becomes a source of risk, shaping both under-reaction and over-reaction (Fisher, 1991). These challenges point to the need for a broader and more integrative analytical framework. As emphasized in interdisciplinary security scholarship, "by bringing together findings obtained across different scientific fields—ranging from sociology, psychology, and political science, through international relations, geopolitics, and legal studies, to economics, military studies, and other scientific disciplines—it becomes possible to identify a spectrum that encompasses nearly all domains in which the phenomenon of security exists, and which are therefore of relevance for its systematic analysis." (Milosavljević, 2014:100). Such an approach helps mitigate the distortive effects of politicized labeling by situating terrorism and destructive cults within wider structural, social, and institutional contexts, rather than treating them as isolated or exceptional pathologies.

Against this background, the present study argues that clear conceptual boundaries between terrorism and destructive cults are a precondition for effective risk management. Conceptual clarity does not imply rigid categorization or static typologies. Rather, it enables the identification of risk indicators that cut across conventional labels, allowing institutions to assess threats dynamically and intervene before violence escalates (Leistedt, 2013; Moghadam, 2009). By grounding conceptual analysis in empirical patterns, risk assessment can move beyond *ex post* designation toward *ex ante* prevention.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it anchors conceptual debate in a comparative empirical analysis of cases occupying the grey zone between terrorism and destructive cults, drawing on systematically compiled data presented in the empirical core of the study. Second, it synthesizes insights from terrorism studies, sociology of religion, criminology, and political psychology to develop a framework for identifying organizational and behavioral risk indicators independent of formal classification (Kruglanski et al., 2006; Crabtree et al., 2020; Umbrasas, 2012). Third, it advances a policy-oriented argument that risk-based approaches offer a more functional basis for prevention than binary legal or ideological labels, particularly in contexts of early warning and preventive intervention (O'Brien, 2013; Fisher, 1991).

By reframing the boundary between terrorism and destructive cults as a problem of risk assessment rather than mere definition, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on violent extremism, early warning, and preventive security policy, demonstrating that conceptual rigor is not an abstract academic exercise but a necessary condition for managing real-world threats. This article aims to provide a clear conceptual delineation between terrorism and destructive cults in order to enhance analytical precision, early risk detection, and preventive intervention. By developing a risk-oriented interpretive framework, the study offers a practical analytical tool for identifying organizational and behavioral indicators of escalation before overt violence occurs. In this sense, the paper serves not only a theoretical purpose, but also provides operational guidance for policymakers, security practitioners, and institutional actors involved in risk assessment, early warning, and preventive security governance.

2. Aim and methodology

The primary aim of this study is to examine how conceptual boundaries between terrorism and destructive cults shape risk perception, assessment, and preventive responses in security and policy

contexts. Rather than treating terrorism and destructive cults as mutually exclusive categories, the study seeks to demonstrate that rigid classificatory distinctions obscure early warning signals and delay effective intervention. More specifically, the study aims to: Identify recurring organizational, behavioral, and ideological patterns that cut across conventional distinctions between terrorism and destructive cults, drawing on empirical cases located in the conceptual “grey zone” between these phenomena. Analyze how misclassification and delayed labeling function as secondary risk factors, influencing institutional responses and policy outcomes (Crenshaw, 2000; O’Brien, 2013). Demonstrate the analytical and practical value of a risk-oriented approach, in which conceptual clarity serves as a prerequisite for early detection, prevention, and proportionate intervention. In doing so, the study contributes to existing literature by reframing the terrorism–cult boundary not as a purely definitional problem, but as a risk management challenge with direct policy implications (Richardson, 2004; Dawson, 2006; Motha, 2009). The study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, which is particularly suited to examining complex social phenomena characterized by blurred boundaries, non-linear escalation, and contextual variation (Crenshaw, 2000; Shaya, 2010). Comparative analysis allows for the identification of shared risk indicators across cases that are formally classified differently, thereby exposing the limitations of binary categorizations. The empirical core of the analysis is built around documented cases of destructive cults, hybrid organizations, and terrorist movements exhibiting cultic characteristics, as systematically presented in the author’s original dataset (see empirical section). These cases were selected because they: occupy ambiguous positions between cultic and terrorist classifications, exhibit varying trajectories of violence (inward-facing, outward-facing, or both), have been subject to delayed or contested institutional labeling. This purposive selection strategy aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of theoretically informed case selection in studies of political violence and extremism (Crenshaw, 2000; Fox & Levin, 1998).

The analysis draws on multiple qualitative data sources, ensuring triangulation and analytical robustness. Primary empirical material compiled by the author, including structured case descriptions and comparative indicators derived from publicly documented events. Secondary academic literature, encompassing terrorism studies, sociology of religion, criminology, political psychology, and legal scholarship (e.g., Richardson, 2004; Dawson, 2006; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Moghadam, 2009). Open-source institutional and judicial materials, such as court decisions, official reports, and publicly available investigations, used to corroborate timelines, organizational structures, and patterns of violence. Where relevant for contextual validation, established terrorism and violence databases (e.g., Global Terrorism Database – GTD; START consortium datasets) were consulted to verify incident classification and escalation patterns. These databases were used cautiously and critically, given documented concerns regarding definitional inconsistency and event-driven bias (Crenshaw, 2000; O’Brien, 2013). The analytical framework is risk-oriented rather than label-driven. Indicators include charismatic leadership, concentration of authority, isolation from wider society, and mechanisms of internal control (Dawson, 2006; Whitsett & Kent, 2003; Crabtree et al., 2020). This dimension distinguishes between inward-facing violence directed at members and outward-facing violence targeting external actors, while recognizing that transitions between these forms may occur abruptly (Richardson, 2004; Fox & Levin, 1998). The analysis examines the role of ideological narratives in legitimizing coercion, sacrifice, and escalation, drawing on cognitive and motivational perspectives (Kruglanski et al., 2009; Moghadam, 2009). Particular attention is paid to thresholds of extreme violence, symbolic targeting, and mass harm, informed by criminological and life-course models of catastrophic violence (Umbrasas, 2012; Leistedt, 2013). These dimensions are applied consistently across all cases, allowing for structured comparison without imposing a priori categorial assumptions.

The empirical analysis is based on an original qualitative dataset comprising five carefully selected cases ($n = 5$), covering the period from 1978 to 2020. The dataset includes Peoples Temple, the Rajneeshee movement, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), all of which occupy analytically significant positions within the conceptual grey zone between destructive cults and terrorist organizations. This temporal scope allows for longitudinal observation of organizational dynamics, escalation pathways, and institutional responses across different historical and socio-political contexts. Case selection followed theoretically informed cri-

teria, including: (1) the presence of charismatic leadership and centralized authority; (2) intensive internal control and social isolation; (3) documented or imminent transition from inward-facing to outward-facing violence; and (4) availability of reliable academic, institutional, and judicial documentation. Data sources included peer-reviewed academic literature, court rulings, official investigative and security reports, media archives, and internationally recognized terrorism and violence databases, ensuring systematic triangulation and analytical robustness.

3. Theoretical Approach

3.1. Conceptual Boundaries, Violence, and Risk-Oriented Interpretation

The difficulty of distinguishing terrorism from other forms of organized violence has long been recognized as a central problem in terrorism studies. Crenshaw (2000) emphasizes that terrorism is a deeply contested concept, frequently used as a rhetorical and political label rather than a stable analytical category. Despite decades of research, definitional uncertainty continues to impede cumulative theory-building and comparative analysis. This instability is further amplified by the tendency to stretch the concept of terrorism to encompass a wide range of violent and non-violent phenomena, thereby diluting its analytical usefulness.

Parallel ambiguities exist in the study of destructive cults and new religious movements. Richardson (2004) argues that violence associated with religious groups cannot be explained solely by belief systems or doctrinal content, as most new religious movements remain non-violent throughout their existence. The challenge, therefore, lies not in identifying belief as a causal factor, but in understanding the conditions under which organizational and social dynamics facilitate escalation toward violence. This perspective undermines simplistic distinctions between “religious” and “political” violence and highlights the porous boundary between cultic and terrorist forms of organization.

Historical analyses further demonstrate that conceptual confusion surrounding terrorism is not a contemporary phenomenon. Shaya’s (2010) examination of anarchist terrorism in fin-de-siècle France reveals how public discourse and institutional responses were shaped by cultural anxieties and moral narratives rather than by systematic assessment of risk. Terrorism was framed as a problem of deviance, irrationality, or intellectual corruption, illustrating how misinterpretation can distort both understanding and response. Such dynamics continue to resonate in modern debates, where violent actors are often interpreted through symbolic frameworks that obscure underlying structural risks.

From a policy perspective, O’Brien (2013) shows that conceptual ambiguity contributes directly to fragmented and inconsistent counterterrorism strategies. Processes of securitization transform social and religious issues into security threats, often without coherent criteria or proportional assessment. As a result, policy responses oscillate between excessive repression and delayed intervention, producing unintended consequences that may exacerbate rather than mitigate risk. Within this context, conceptual boundaries are not merely theoretical constructs but foundational elements shaping institutional behavior.

3.2. Charismatic Authority, Control, and Organizational Risk

A central point of convergence between terrorism and destructive cults lies in patterns of leadership and internal organization. Charismatic authority has been widely identified as a defining feature of many destructive cults, yet its role in the emergence of violence remains contested. Dawson (2006) cautions against pathologizing charisma itself, arguing that charismatic leadership is a common and often benign feature of social and religious life. Violence emerges not from charisma per se, but from the mismanagement of legitimacy, routinization, and authority under conditions of social isolation and perceived threat.

Empirical studies of cultic environments underscore the significance of inward-facing control mechanisms. Whitsett and Kent (2003) document how family disruption, social isolation, and intensive control of interpersonal relationships function as tools of domination within cultic groups. These mechanisms may not initially manifest as outward violence, yet they create closed systems in which dissent is suppressed and loyalty is enforced. Such conditions generate what can be understood as latent risk: a structural capacity for coercion and harm that may be redirected outward under specific circumstances.

Crabtree et al. (2020) further illuminate this dynamic through their analysis of cults of personality and preference falsification. In highly controlled environments, followers may publicly conform while privately dissenting, producing an illusion of consensus that reinforces leader authority. This dynamic significantly increases organizational fragility and heightens the risk of sudden, non-linear escalation when legitimacy is challenged. From a risk management perspective, such environments represent high-impact, low-visibility threats.

Legal and institutional responses to destructive cults introduce additional layers of complexity. Fisher (1991) demonstrates that aggressive legal strategies—such as civil litigation and deprogramming—have historically blurred the boundary between protecting individuals and infringing upon religious freedom. Misclassification of religious groups as inherently dangerous may provoke legal overreach, while underestimation of genuine risk can delay intervention. Both outcomes carry significant policy costs, reinforcing the need for analytically grounded risk assessment rather than reactive labeling.

Table 1. Comparative Case Classification Based on Risk Indicators.

Case	Charismatic Authority	Social Isolation	Inward Harm	Outward Violence	Escalation Triggers	Final Classification
Aum Shinrikyo	High	High	High	High	High	Hybrid / Terrorist with cultic dynamics
Peoples Temple	High	High	High	Medium	High	Destructive cult
Order of Solar Temple	High	High	High	High	High	Hybrid
Rajneeshee Movement	High	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	Hybrid
Lord's Resistance Army	High	High	High	High	High	Terrorist group with cultic dynamics

3.3. Misclassification, Moral Panic, and Secondary Risk

Beyond the direct risk posed by violent groups, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the dangers of misclassification and moral panic. Richardson (2004) warns that exaggerated or sensationalist responses to religious movements may provoke escalation by reinforcing perceptions of persecution and existential threat. Such dynamics echo Shaya's (2010) historical observations regarding the politicization of violence and the construction of "dangerous" identities. Motha (2009) further complicates this picture by examining liberal legal dilemmas surrounding cults and suicide bombers. He argues that rigid moral binaries obscure the complex social and political contexts in which violence emerges, limiting the capacity of legal systems to respond proportionately. This critique resonates with policy-oriented analyses that identify misclassification itself as a form of institutional risk. Empirical research on institutional response supports this concern. Jurisic and Marčeta (2024) demonstrate how failures of coordination and communication between civilian and religious authorities during crises can undermine effective risk management. Although their study focuses on disaster response, the findings highlight broader patterns of institutional hesitation and role ambiguity that are equally relevant to the prevention of extremist violence.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that conceptual boundaries function not only as analytical tools but as mechanisms of governance. When poorly defined, they generate secondary risks by distorting perception, delaying intervention, and legitimizing disproportionate responses. Effective risk management therefore depends on the capacity to distinguish between belief, organization, and behavior, rather than relying on static labels. “Disaster Risk Reduction and Management reduces natural and man-made disaster risks. It includes identifying risks, preparing, responding, recovering, and reducing them” (Balanggoy, 2024:122).

3.3.1. Results

The empirical cases categorized as destructive cults reveal a consistent pattern of intensive inward-facing control and harm, primarily directed toward members rather than external targets. Across the examined cases, organizational structures are characterized by strong hierarchical authority, charismatic leadership, and systematic isolation from broader social environments. Harm manifests through psychological coercion, enforced obedience, disruption of family ties, and normalization of internal discipline, rather than through immediate outward violence. A key empirical finding is that the absence of early outward-facing violence does not correspond to low risk. On the contrary, the accumulation of internal coercive capacity generates a latent risk environment in which escalation becomes possible without substantial structural change. Indicators such as increasing ideological absolutism, leader infallibility, and intensified loyalty demands precede moments of crisis and transformation. In several cases, these warning signals were observable long before institutional attention or intervention occurred. The data further indicate that destructive cults often benefit from prolonged institutional ambiguity. During extended periods, they remain classified as religious or social movements, despite exhibiting organizational characteristics associated with heightened vulnerability to escalation. This classification gap allows internal control mechanisms to consolidate, increasing both the severity of internal harm and the potential for outward-facing violence under destabilizing conditions. A second group of cases occupies a hybrid position between destructive cults and terrorist organizations. These organizations combine cultic internal structures with episodic or symbolic outward-facing violence. The empirical material demonstrates that escalation in such cases is non-linear and abrupt, rather than gradual or incremental. In hybrid cases, internal organizational dynamics remain largely unchanged during the transition to outward violence. Charismatic authority, centralized decision-making, and ideological closure continue to define internal functioning, even as violent acts are redirected toward external targets. This finding suggests that escalation does not require organizational transformation but may instead reflect strategic or symbolic shifts initiated by leadership in response to perceived existential threats.

Institutional responses to hybrid organizations are consistently delayed and fragmented. Authorities frequently oscillate between treating these groups as religious anomalies and reclassifying them as security threats only after severe incidents occur. The empirical data show that this delay corresponds with missed opportunities for early intervention, reinforcing the study's central concern regarding the risks associated with rigid conceptual boundaries. The dataset also includes cases formally designated as terrorist organizations that exhibit pronounced cultic internal dynamics. These groups engage in sustained outward-facing violence while simultaneously maintaining closed internal environments characterized by ideological absolutism, moral polarization, and strong leader authority. In these cases, violence serves both instrumental and symbolic functions. Outward attacks reinforce internal cohesion, legitimize leadership authority, and sustain narratives of moral struggle. The findings indicate that organizations exhibiting cultic internal structures demonstrate a higher tolerance for extreme and indiscriminate violence, including mass-casualty events and self-sacrificial tactics. The empirical material further suggests that cultic internal dynamics may intensify terrorist violence by reducing internal constraints and suppressing dissent. The convergence of ideological rigidity and organizational closure facilitates escalation beyond strategic calculation, contributing to disproportionate harm relative to the group's size or operational capacity. The empirical results demonstrate that:

- Destructive cults frequently generate high levels of latent risk despite limited outward violence.
- Hybrid organizations represent critical points of boundary breakdown, characterized by rapid and unpredictable escalation.
- Terrorist organizations with cultic characteristics exhibit intensified violence linked to internal domination and ideological closure.
- Reliance on static classifications contributes to delayed intervention and increased harm.
- These findings provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion and support the argument that conceptual boundaries must be reassessed through a risk-oriented lens in order to improve preventive and policy responses.

4. Conceptual Boundaries as a Risk Management Problem

The findings presented in the previous section demonstrate that the boundary between terrorism and destructive cults is not merely analytically blurred, but operationally consequential. From a risk management perspective, conceptual ambiguity directly affects how threats are perceived, prioritized, and addressed. When organizations are classified primarily on the basis of outward-facing violence, early-stage risk indicators rooted in organizational structure and internal dynamics remain insufficiently recognized.

The results show that destructive cults often accumulate substantial levels of latent risk without engaging in overt external violence. This pattern highlights a critical gap between formal classification and actual risk potential. In risk management terms, such groups represent low-frequency but high-impact threats, whose danger lies not in immediate activity but in escalation capacity. The tendency to treat these groups as non-security issues until violence occurs reflects a reactive rather than preventive approach to risk.

This dynamic confirms earlier theoretical concerns regarding definitional instability and misclassification. However, the empirical findings advance this debate by demonstrating that conceptual boundaries function as filters within risk assessment processes, shaping what is recognized as a threat and when intervention becomes politically and institutionally feasible.

Table 2. Risk Continuum

DESTRUCTIVE CULTS → HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS → TERRORIST GROUPS		
High inward harm	Non-linear escalation	Sustained outward violence
Strong isolation	Mixed internal logic	Strategic mass-casualty logic
Charismatic control	Rapid threshold crossing	Ideological absolutism

4.1. Organizational Dynamics and Risk Escalation

Across all case categories, the results indicate that escalation is primarily driven by organizational and leadership dynamics, rather than by shifts in ideology or external provocation alone. From a risk management standpoint, leadership centralization, charismatic authority, and organizational closure emerge as structural risk multipliers.

The empirical evidence shows that escalation often occurs without significant organizational restructuring (Ayalew & Lema, 2025; Balanggoy, 2024; Cvetković et al., 2025; Jurišić & Marčeta, 2024; Marčeta & Jurišić, 2024; Masaba et al., 2025; Vidović et al., 2025). In hybrid cases, outward-facing violence emerges abruptly, while internal control mechanisms remain intact. This finding is particularly relevant for risk assessment models that assume gradual radicalization or incremental escalation. Instead, the observed patterns suggest that risk accumulates silently and may materialize suddenly once critical thresholds are crossed. In line with this, "Psychological resilience is equally critical, addressing the profound impacts disasters have on mental health" (Marčeta & Jurišić, 2024:28).

Such non-linear escalation challenges traditional monitoring frameworks that rely on incident frequency or ideological signaling. Effective risk management therefore requires attention to organizational fragility, legitimacy crises, and decision-making concentration, rather than exclusive focus on declared goals or public rhetoric.

4.2. Inward-Facing Harm as an Early Risk Indicator

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of inward-facing harm as a precursor to broader violence. The results indicate that intensive internal coercion, suppression of dissent, and normalization of obedience function as early warning indicators, even in the absence of external attacks. From a risk management perspective, inward-facing violence should not be treated as categorically separate from outward-facing threats. Instead, it signals the presence of organizational conditions that lower moral and behavioral constraints on violence more generally. The empirical data suggest that groups capable of inflicting severe harm on their own members possess the organizational capacity to redirect violence outward under conditions of stress or perceived threat. This insight has direct implications for threat assessment. Monitoring frameworks that exclude inward-facing harm from security-relevant analysis risk overlooking critical stages of escalation. The results thus support a broader conception of risk that incorporates internal dynamics as integral components of threat evaluation.

The discussion also highlights misclassification itself as a source of secondary risk. The empirical findings show that delayed or contested labeling contributes to institutional hesitation, fragmented response, and missed opportunities for prevention. When groups remain framed as religious or social movements despite accumulating high-risk characteristics, intervention thresholds are raised, allowing escalation to proceed unchecked. Conversely, abrupt reclassification following violent incidents often triggers disproportionate responses, including aggressive securitization and legal overreach. From a risk management standpoint, both underreaction and overreaction represent failures of proportional assessment. The results suggest that reliance on binary classifications amplifies uncertainty rather than reducing it. In this sense, conceptual boundaries do not merely describe phenomena; they actively shape risk governance. Effective risk management therefore depends on the ability to distinguish between belief systems, organizational practices, and behavioral trajectories, rather than relying on static labels that obscure evolving threat profiles.

4.2.1. Implications for Risk-Oriented Analysis

Taken together, the findings underscore the need to reconceptualize the terrorism–cult boundary as a risk-sensitive continuum rather than a categorical divide. The empirical evidence demonstrates that risk emerges through organizational processes that cut across formal classifications, rendering static labels insufficient for prevention. By integrating empirical observation with a risk-oriented interpretive framework, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of violent escalation. Conceptual clarity, in this context, is not an end in itself, but a necessary condition for identifying, monitoring, and interpreting risk before violence reaches irreversible thresholds. This discussion sets the analytical foundation for the following section, which develops explicit risk management and policy implications, translating these insights into preventive frameworks and institutional strategies.

5. Risk management and Policy Implication

The preceding analysis demonstrates that conceptual boundaries between terrorism and destructive cults are not neutral descriptive tools, but active components of risk governance. In practice, these boundaries determine which institutions are mobilized, which legal instruments are applied, and at what stage intervention becomes legitimate. When classification is treated as a prerequisite

for action, rather than as an evolving analytical judgment, risk management becomes inherently reactive. From a risk management perspective, the empirical findings confirm that formal designation consistently lags behind risk accumulation. Organizations exhibiting high-risk characteristics—such as leadership absolutism, organizational closure, and ideological rigidity—often remain outside the scope of preventive security measures as long as violence is inward-facing or symbolically ambiguous. This pattern reflects a broader tendency within security governance to equate risk with overt attack frequency, rather than with escalation potential (Crenshaw, 2000; O'Brien, 2013). Effective risk management requires a reversal of this logic. Instead of asking whether an organization qualifies as “terrorist,” institutions must assess whether observable conditions indicate a credible trajectory toward mass harm. Conceptual clarity, in this sense, functions as an enabling condition: it allows risk assessment to operate independently of politically charged labels, while still respecting legal and normative constraints. Although this study is qualitative in nature, quantitative data provide important contextual support for its risk-oriented conclusions. Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) indicate that extreme violence is highly concentrated: a relatively small number of organizations account for a disproportionate share of mass-casualty attacks worldwide (START, 2023). This concentration effect underscores a central risk management principle—low-frequency does not equal low risk, particularly when escalation potential is high. Similarly, Moghadam’s (2009) analysis of suicide terrorism demonstrates that suicide attacks constitute a minority of terrorist incidents but are responsible for a markedly higher proportion of fatalities. From a preventive perspective, this finding is significant not because of the tactic itself, but because it highlights the organizational and ideological conditions that normalize extreme self-sacrifice. Comparable dynamics have been observed in destructive cults exhibiting apocalyptic or purification narratives, even in the absence of formal terrorist designation. Criminological research further reinforces this point. Fox and Levin (1998) show that mass and multiple homicides are statistically rare events, yet they generate disproportionate social, psychological, and political impact. In risk management terms, such events represent low-probability, high-impact scenarios, precisely the category of threats that conventional, incident-driven security models struggle to address. At the same time, reliance on quantitative databases must be approached with caution. Definitions of terrorism vary across datasets, and classification often depends on retrospective interpretation shaped by political context (Crenshaw, 2000). Consequently, quantitative indicators should complement, rather than replace, qualitative risk assessment grounded in organizational analysis. The empirical findings support the development of indicator-based early warning frameworks that cut across formal classifications. Rather than focusing exclusively on ideological content or declared political goals, risk assessment should prioritize observable organizational and behavioral indicators, including:

- Leadership centralization and personalization of authority
- Progressive social isolation and boundary control
- Suppression of internal dissent and normalization of coercion
- Ideological absolutism and moral polarization
- Tolerance for internal harm as a precursor to outward violence

These indicators are consistent with prior research on charismatic domination, preference falsification, and escalation dynamics (Dawson, 2006; Whitsett & Kent, 2003; Crabtree et al., 2020). Importantly, they allow institutions to detect risk before violence becomes externally visible, reducing reliance on crisis-driven intervention. From a policy perspective, incorporating such indicators requires intersectoral coordination. Security agencies alone are often ill-equipped to monitor inward-facing dynamics, which may fall within the purview of social services, regulatory bodies, or community institutions. Fragmented governance structures, as noted by O'Brien (2013), create blind spots that delay response and amplify harm.

5.1. Toward a Preventive Risk Management Framework

Drawing on the findings of this study, a preventive risk management framework should incorporate the following principles:

1. **Dynamic Risk Assessment** Risk evaluation must be continuous and adaptive, recognizing that escalation may occur abruptly rather than incrementally (Umbrasas, 2012).
2. **Conceptual Flexibility** Analytical frameworks should allow organizations to move along a continuum of risk without requiring immediate reclassification, preserving both legal proportionality and preventive capacity.
3. **Integrated Governance** Effective prevention depends on coordination between security, legal, social, and community institutions, reducing institutional silos and response delays.
4. **Early, Proportionate Intervention** Targeted monitoring, protective measures, and non-coercive interventions may reduce escalation risk without triggering the negative effects associated with premature securitization (Richardson, 2004; Motha, 2009).

By operationalizing conceptual clarity within risk management practice, institutions can move beyond reactive responses toward anticipatory governance capable of addressing complex and hybrid threats.

5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on open-source data, including academic literature, media reports, judicial documents, and publicly available institutional materials. While this approach ensures transparency and replicability, it also entails constraints related to data completeness, reliability, and potential reporting bias, particularly in the absence of access to classified security or intelligence sources.

Second, the case selection follows a purposive qualitative strategy focused on analytically significant examples located in the conceptual “grey zone” between terrorism and destructive cults. Although this approach enables in-depth comparative insight, it also introduces a degree of selection bias and limits the statistical representativeness of the findings. Consequently, the results should be interpreted primarily in terms of theoretical and analytical contribution rather than broad empirical generalization.

Third, definitional inconsistencies across jurisdictions and institutional contexts complicate strict classification and comparative analysis. Variations in legal, political, and cultural interpretations of both terrorism and destructive cults affect case labeling, data availability, and institutional response, thereby introducing additional analytical uncertainty.

Finally, the scope for generalization is inherently limited, as the findings pertain mainly to organizational dynamics and escalation trajectories observed in the selected cases. Further research is therefore required to test the applicability of the proposed risk-oriented framework across broader samples, diverse cultural contexts, and different forms of violent extremism. Future studies should integrate quantitative methods, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches in order to enhance empirical robustness, refine early warning indicators, and strengthen preventive risk assessment models.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the conceptual boundary between terrorism and destructive cults not as a purely classificatory problem, but as a critical condition shaping risk perception, assessment, and prevention. The analysis has demonstrated that rigid distinctions between these phenomena obscure important organizational and behavioral similarities, while simultaneously delaying institutional recognition of escalation potential. In this sense, conceptual ambiguity does not merely reflect analytical uncertainty; it actively contributes to governance failures in the management of violent risk. By grounding conceptual analysis in empirical cases occupying the grey zone between terrorism and destructive cults, the study has shown that escalation trajectories are driven less by ideological labels than by internal organizational dynamics. Charismatic authority, centralized decision-making, social isolation, and ideological absolutism emerged as recurrent patterns across

formally distinct categories. These features function as structural risk factors that enable both inward-facing harm and outward-facing violence, often without substantial organizational transformation. As a result, reliance on outward violence as the primary trigger for security intervention proves insufficient for prevention. The findings further highlight that inward-facing harm within closed organizations should not be treated as analytically or normatively separate from broader security concerns. Rather, such harm constitutes an early warning signal of organizational environments in which moral constraints on violence have eroded. Ignoring these dynamics in the name of conceptual or legal caution allows risk to accumulate silently, increasing the likelihood of sudden and catastrophic escalation. From a risk management perspective, the study underscores the limitations of event-driven and label-dependent approaches to security governance. When formal classification is treated as a prerequisite for action, institutions are structurally inclined toward reactive intervention. Conversely, premature or indiscriminate labeling risks over-securitization and disproportionate response. Effective prevention therefore depends on conceptual frameworks capable of distinguishing between belief systems, organizational practices, and behavioral trajectories, allowing for dynamic assessment and proportionate intervention. The central contribution of this article lies in reframing conceptual boundaries as tools of risk governance rather than static categories. Conceptual clarity, as demonstrated, is not an abstract academic ideal but a practical prerequisite for anticipating escalation, allocating resources, and coordinating institutional response. By shifting the analytical focus from labels to risk indicators, policymakers and practitioners can enhance early warning capacity while preserving normative and legal safeguards. Ultimately, managing the grey zone between terrorism and destructive cults requires a balance between analytical rigor and policy flexibility. This study argues that such balance can only be achieved by integrating empirical insight with a risk-oriented conceptual framework—one that recognizes the dynamic and hybrid nature of contemporary violent threats and prioritizes prevention over reaction.

7. References

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