

*Every criminal has  
a story worth  
exploring.*

Speaker

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# Prof. dr. Bram Sizoo

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Certified Psychiatrist |  
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European  
Peace  
Conference

# What's the story behind a terrorist?

Prof. dr. Bram Sizoo on activism turning into extremism

*We are excited to announce **Prof. dr. Bram Sizoo** as a speaker on seeing the human behind the perpetrator at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.*

## Prof. dr. Bram Sizoo

Prof. dr. Bram Sizoo is a psychiatrist and advises the police on the management of fixated individuals and the prevention of radicalisation. Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference came across Bram in the UvA (University of Amsterdam) masterclass on polarisation. Oscar loves how Bram tests his ideas with examples. Both like to further explore the depths of our human relationships.

## What makes you look for the story of the terrorist?

“As a medical doctor, I took the oath that you do not leave a human helplessly suffer. Typically, when people are stigmatised as merely ‘addicted, junks, terrorists, extremists or nuts’, then I automatically ask myself: ‘What is their story?’ Of course, what they have done is often illegal and should not be condoned. However, I naturally respect another person’s autonomy. Can I understand why this person has come to a violation of the law? Unfortunately, the wider public often confuses this empathy (understanding perpetrator actions) with sympathy (approving perpetrator actions). I always wonder: What do extremists see? And how can we get the involved parties to also understand each other’s positions?”

## Do we risk seeing perpetrators as victims as soon as we acknowledge their story?

“We are never merely and solely a victim or perpetrator. There is always a connection between the two. Sure, the one who violated the law, can be both legally and morally a perpetrator. However, maybe this person was a victim of a temptation or from their own impulses (like the anger they could not control)? Similarly, with victims, you can ask yourself if they really never noticed anything of the sexual abuse? Maybe, I think, what makes a perpetrator is not so much about having the intention to commit the crime itself as it is about our inability to *withstand* doing so.”

## What makes the inability to withstand a crime key?

“In psychiatry, when you look at addictions, in early last century, it was deemed by at most as a neurobiological brain disorder. Similarly, perpetrators may have command hallucinations. In a psychosis, these may take us over and we cannot resist them. If it is the case that perpetrators cannot stand against those voices, then they may indeed be mentally incapacitated. So, while their actions may be morally wrong, juridically we cannot keep them liable. They could not resist their impulses, right? You could say that they are a victim of their character. Yet, I must admit, when you look long and deep enough, you can always find some degree of victimhood.”

## Are all perpetrators per definition also a victim you'd say?

“I don't think you can assume that a priori. Sure, you can assume there is a story behind a heinous crime. I would however not say that all perpetrators are necessarily victims. For example, a young guy, raised in a normal family, gets fascinated with an Islamist extremist narrative and kills people in a war zone abroad. Why did this guy not become a consultant? There are two axes I look at when thinking about these cases. First, did someone resist? Second, if they did not resist, could they not resist (as they were incapacitated) or did they just not do anything to prevent violating the law? Even when we do have a neurobiological preference for sex or gambling addictions, there is always something in us that can say 'I don't know how, but I do want it differently'. You can cancel your internet subscription, right? Just like that we cannot assume that all victims are innocent. Maybe the bullied also hit the bully? You need to look at it case by case.”

*Not our “intention to commit a crime” makes us perpetrators. Rather, it's the extent that we do not “withstand” doing it.*

## If it is on a case by case, what makes activism turn into extremism?

“Our democracy protects certain legal boundaries. When they can be caste to the side, your life is no longer safe. This holds for both the ‘Robin Hoods’ (e.g. those from the sovereign citizen movement) and for the ‘self-enriching, evil elites’. We have the law to decide what is allowed –and what is not. This is a great good. Yet, the law can be also morally unjust. For example, Rosa parks was put in jail. Eventually, and this is what made her action activism, she helped move the law and change the rules of the game. The law is never set in concrete. It is based on consensus. I would even say: Democracy thrives with activism. The tension that is created by activism, creates public debates. Should we punish this or not? Is this person a perpetrator or a victim? Do we consider this activism or extremism? For example, in peace time, having conscientious objections to the army, we see as a human right. But it changes when war is looming around the corner.”

## Publications

- Sizoo, B., Strijbos, D., & Glas, G. (2022). Grievance-fueled violence can be better understood using an enactive approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 997121.
- Sizoo, B., van den Brink, W., Koeter, M., van Eenige, M. G., van Wijngaarden-Cremers, P., & van der Gaag, R. J. (2010). Treatment-seeking adults with autism or ADHD and co-morbid substance use disorder: prevalence, risk factors, and functional disability. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 107(1), 44-50.
- Van den Boogert, F., Sizoo, B., Spaan, P., Tolstra, S., Bouman, Y. H., Hoogendijk, W. J., & Roza, S. J. (2021). Sensory processing and aggressive behavior in adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Brain sciences*, 11(1), 95.

*Democracy thrives with activism. The tension it creates makes for good political debates. That is how we determine what is extremist –or not (yet).*



Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

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# European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

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"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts<sup>inInt</sup> and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

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