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A Look at the State of Research on [Counter-] Terrorism and Violent Extremism

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Abstract: In continuation of a previous survey published in 2021 in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, a new survey exploring the state of [counter-]terrorism research, resulted in 50 responses from researchers and directors of think tanks, centres, institutes and programmes in the field of terrorism studies. We had asked them ten topical questions that are both research- and policy-orientated, based on suggestions we had earlier received from researchers in the field. The responses to the questionnaire are reproduced in this Research Note in italics, supplemented by our comments on the achievements and challenges presently facing terrorism and violent extremism studies.

Keywords: Terrorism research, counter-terrorism research, violent extremism

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Introduction

So much is published on terrorism, counter-terrorism and (violent) extremism that even full-time analysts are unable to keep up with the literature and absorb all new developments. It is with this in mind that we have tried to gain an overview by approaching colleagues in the field and asking them for their views. This is our second recent attempt to take the pulse on the state of research in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. In late 2020 and early 2021 two of the present authors distributed a questionnaire to colleagues in the field, and the results of that survey were reported in two issues of *Perspectives on Terrorism* published in summer 2021.[1] One of the more striking findings of that earlier survey was the low degree of consensus among researchers about key issues in our field of study. The current survey again revealed a very wide range of different answers, making any statistical analysis (e.g., on how many researchers hold one view or the other) unfruitful, since the diverse views of the respondents could not meaningfully be translated into percentages. Therefore, we present the results of the survey in qualitative terms, mostly in the form of (often lightly edited) quotes from the respondents, identified by *italics*.

For this survey, distributed in late 2022 and early 2023, we asked ten questions relating to relevant research and policy issues (along with a general profile question[2]). These ten questions were inspired in part by responses to a pre-questionnaire which we had sent previously to more than two dozen experts,[3] asking them: "What are, in your opinion, the three most important questions that need to be asked at this moment in time about (counter-) terrorism research and analysis?"

We received a total of 50 responses to the survey, which represents just under 20 percent of the questionnaires sent out – a response rate similar to that of our 2020-2021 survey. The questionnaire was answered by experts from 36 academic institutes, centres and programmes. Another fifteen respondents were working in think tanks, while four respondents worked for non-governmental or civil society organisations, three respondents were affiliated with national government centres, and two were working for international organisations.[4] Respondents to the ten questions included 36 males and fourteen females. With regard to geographical representation, 20 were affiliated with a North American institution, fourteen with a European institution, and sixteen with other regions.

For the remainder of this Research Note, we provide representative lists of the insightful responses we received to each of the ten questions, followed by some brief analysis and comments. In many instances, these responses are provided verbatim, but others have been paraphrased, combined with responses expressing similar observations, and edited for grammar and spelling.

Research Topics, Present and Future

Our 1st question on the survey was: *"What is currently the main focus of research/projects of your organisation related to (counter-)terrorism and (countering) extremism?"*[5] Among the responses to this question, we were informed about almost 100 topics of research. Many overlapped, and the following list covers most of the current research project areas mentioned:

> *- Research on specific terrorist and extremist organisations (PKK, IS, AQ, Taliban, Boko Haram, Hindutva and Buddhist extremist groups).*
> *- Research on specific countries and regions (Afghanistan, South Asia and South East Asia, Central Asia, Sahel, Middle East and North Africa, Balkan and Mediterranean regions).*
> *- Study of specific types of terrorism (right-wing terrorism, white supremacist militancy, jihadist militancy, jihadi governance, mass shootings, lone actor terrorism, CBRN terrorism and nuclear trafficking, gender-based violence, climate protection extremism, and incel terrorism).*
> *- Terrorism and/as irregular warfare, hybrid warfare (including foreign governments fomenting extremism within another country).*
> *- Study of anti-government extremism, including infiltration into military and police forces.*
> *- Research on off- and online radicalisation processes, extremist use of social media, online hate speech, online extremist ecosystems, algorithmic amplification of borderline content, disinformation, use of new technologies by non-state actors, the dark side of social media and generative AI.*
> *- Violent extremists with military or law enforcement experience.*
> *- Evaluation research on P/CVE and de-radicalisation programmes, effects of counter-terrorism, evaluating CT policies and strategies, role of intelligence in CT, multilateralism and counterterrorism, state- and local responses to violent extremism, resilience, protection and surveillance, risk assessment and management, and how police repression affects violent extremism.*
> *- Communication-based (CVE/CT) interventions, counter-radical narratives, content moderation and regulation of online terrorist and violent extremist content, disinformation.*
> *- Role of state failure, state fragility, and grievance-fuelled violence.*
> *- Trends and developments in transnational terrorism, including databases on the size of terrorist groups worldwide, and emerging trends.*

New compared to our earlier survey – but not unexpected – is the focus on the rise of anti-government extremism, especially in open societies. Much of this anti-establishment type of violence is not characterised as terrorism, but the sheer amount of it, especially by hate groups from the far right, is a worrying phenomenon. So far, global databases on terrorism have not fully accounted for it, while the full extent of this phenomenon really shows up in only country-specific monitoring efforts such as the large-scale MOTRA project of the Federal German Criminal Office (BKA) in Wiesbaden.[6] There can be little doubt that this type of anti-establishment violence is fuelled in part by social-media based conspiracy theories, encouraged by the anonymity of the Internet and probably also facilitated by the algorithms used by major internet organisations.[7]

Our 2nd question was: *"On which areas/topics relating to (counter-)terrorism and (countering) extremism do you expect your organisation to invest more time and resources in the near future?"* The answers showed partial overlap with the first one on current research, as can also be seen

from this representative list of answers:

> *- Anti-government extremism and polarisation in the United States and other countries.*
> *- Protection and surveillance of persons that are threatened by terrorism and organised crime.*
> *- Study of the mainstreaming of far-right ideology.*
> *- Hybrid forms of extremism.*
> *- Transnational trends and connections between extremists.*
> *- Research on extreme right-wing groups and Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (REMVE].*
> *- Violent extremists with military or law enforcement experience.*
> *- Research on conspiracy theories and their connections to offline violence.*
> *- Countering conspiracy-based extremism (e.g., QAnon).*
> *- Cross-cutting ideologies and beliefs that cover all forms of extremism.*
> *- The collective nature of lone-actor terrorism.*
> *- How social media and its permeation lowered entry barriers to terrorism.*
> *- Radicalisation and social media and AI content moderation tools.*
> *- Effects of emerging technologies (e.g., AI, drones, biotechnology) on the tactical capabilities of terrorist organisations and on CT efforts.*
> *- Counter-narratives and promotion of moderation.*
> *- Nexus of terrorism and organised crime.*
> *- Building more comprehensive and empirically rich datasets.*

Remarkably, there was no explicit mention of state terrorism as a subject of new studies, despite the fact that the ongoing war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine uses terror tactics by deliberately attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure targets on a very large scale. State-sponsored terrorism or foreign influence on extremist milieus are equally absent from the responses, in spite of its clear manifestations in various geographical contexts and possible further expansion in light of the return to geopolitics and great powers rivalry. Other forms of extremism, such as left-wing extremism or the radicalisation of certain movements (like some environmental groups) seem also largely ignored. While a number of the themes listed above are being studied by several organisations, other themes – not listed here – are investigated by only one or two organisations—e.g., *how violence affects CT practitioners* (a growing problem) or *how to do Red Teaming with Emerging Technologies*.

Assessing the State of Research

Our 3rd question was: *"In the course of the past two years, where do you see real progress in our understanding of drivers and causes of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism?"* Here we received a great many responses, including:

> *- Better insights into the role of social media (and other digital media) in radicalisation*
> *- Greater reliance on evidence, data, and rigor.*
> *- Increasing focus on the overlapping topics of right-wing extremism, racism, misogyny, incel, etc.*
> *- Realisation that policing and 'war on terror' approaches largely failed and the switch to a community resilience approach.*
> *- The use of machine-learning techniques to analyse social media data.*

- More definitive empirical testing of the role played by socio-economic marginalisation in fomenting different types of extremism and radicalisation.
- Significant and sophisticated empirical studies of the links between mental illness, social maladjustment, and violent extremism.
- Dataset development designed to facilitate comprehensive cross-national comparisons of potential radicalisation factors.
- Instead of focusing only on ideological drivers of violent behaviour, now equal attention is also being paid to underlying socio-economic and political grievances.
- We are now also discovering more about the insidious intersections between mainstream political polarisation, global disinformation campaigns and the propagation of extremism.
- Much more attention to, and research on, right-wing terrorism, extremism and radicalisation, especially (in the US) in the wake of the 6 January, 2021 attacks.
- Research on conspiracy theories and how they develop and can be countered.
- Researchers have made strides in understanding how extremist content spreads online, how individuals are influenced by online networks, and the mechanisms of online recruitment.
- The importance of inclusion/exclusion of individuals or groups in, or from, the political process as a driver or protective factor of the radicalisation process.
- We know a lot more about what works and doesn't work for positive intervention and counter-extremism campaigns.
- Stochastic terrorism as a helpful concept to understand terrorism manifestations and occurrences.

While ten years ago, Marc Sageman, an American researcher, could claim that there was stagnation in terrorism research,[8] nobody would make such a claim today. There has been progress on many fronts. For instance, to comment on the last item on this list, we have seen a clearer connection between hate speech by political leaders and subsequent attacks on "public enemies" identified by them. Demonisation of certain individuals and groups by populist and other political leaders in and out of government clearly increases the chances that one or more lone actor attacks take place on targets so identified, although the exact when and where cannot be predicted. Jihadist groups also rely on this incitement mechanism, hoping that one or more of their ideological followers at home or abroad will be inspired by their call to action. This phenomenon has been termed *stochastic terrorism,* and its occurrence has been statstically proven in a number of instances.[9] Related to this, imitation and contagion by lone actors (and also by terrorist groups) has been observed many times, even before the Internet became the preferred channel for direct and indirect incitement to violence.[10] One related finding from recent research is this: While it was long held by a number of researchers that most terrorists are quite normal persons (in a clinical, not a moral sense), more recent research has shown that at least some mental health problems tend to be more widespread among certain types of terrorists than in the general population.[11] Mentally unstable lone actors, in their quest for personal significance, seem to be especially receptive to distant calls for terrorist attacks.

Our 4th question was*: "What fundamental research and knowledge gaps remain in terrorism and counter-terrorism studies?"* With so much research on terrorism already, one might expect

that there are few research and knowledge gaps left. However, we received many suggestions including the following:

> - *How climate change is impacting terrorism is understudied.*
> - *There is a lack of research on far-left extremism.*
> - *More research on victims of terrorism is needed.*
> - *What are the negative unintended consequences of CT?*
> - *We need to conduct research on the past 20 years of CT failures.*
> - *How to measure the effectiveness of counter-terrorism?*
> - *What are the relations between extremism and violence?*
> - *P/CVE methods and programmes: we understand very little about how programmes work, what they do and why, what is effective, etc.*
> - *How the shift to great power competition in the strategic priorities of most countries is going to affect both terrorism and counterterrorism.*
> - *The links between state terrorism and insurgent terrorism.*
> - *The relationship between empowerment of women and girls and national and international security.*
> - *The interface between communication technology and the use of violence by state and non-state actors.*
> - *Nefarious role of intelligence services and other state agencies.*
> - *The knowledge transfer and reciprocal integration between academics and intelligence bodies.*
> - *Strategies for involving media in CT efforts.*
> - *Literature on CT remains very Global North-centric and lacks real understanding of regional divergencies, differences and peculiarities.*
> - *How best to understand algorithmic transparency and whether there is undue influence on extremism by algorithms.*
> - *Need further analysis of youth identity issues.*

The first item on the list is a sign of the times. The climate emergency is affecting almost every issue. Some research has explored various links to terrorism, notably the exacerbation of local grievances or migration, as well as the manipulation of environmental concerns among far-right narratives.[12] The second topic – the study of far left terrorism – has largely disappeared from research agendas. While it is true that terrorism from left wing groups is less frequent than forty and fifty years ago – and remains far less severe than far-right terrorism – it is likely to increase again, if only in response to rising right-wing extremism. If anything, this confirms the cyclical nature of terrorism – and terrorism research. The topic of state terrorism is partly covered by genocide studies, the study of human rights violations, research on war crimes, and the study of crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, it should also be integrated into mainstream terrorism research, not least because there is a link between state terrorism and insurgent terrorism, fuelled by revenge leading to reciprocal escalation. Finally, several respondents referenced the problem of measuring effectiveness of counter-terrorism. This is an especially complex issue that we feel warrants much further exploration, in spite of a number of important studies already published on this topic.

Our 5ᵗʰ question was: "*What is most needed to improve the quality of research in the field of counter-)terrorism studies?*" Here is a representative list of the responses we received:

> - *High-quality and reliable data are essential for conducting research.*
> - *More funding to collect data.*
> - *Researchers would benefit from better access to data on law enforcement/intelligence actors in counterterrorism.*
> - *Improved exchange of information between intelligence and academia.*
> - *Greater access to the perpetrators of terrorism.*
> - *First hand interviews.*
> - *There is far too little serious, truly interdisciplinary research.*
> - *The use of more rigorous methodologies, such as experimental designs and randomised controlled trials (evaluation of CT efforts).*
> - *Drive toward consensus on basic definition, components of extremist beliefs, distinguishing extremism from radicalisation and/or fringe beliefs.*
> - *Being able to study the underlying causes of radicalisation of any ideologies or movements to push back against flawed government policies which indirectly contribute to terrorism.*
> - *Ongoing dialogue between academics and practitioners to inform empirical research with feedback from frontline workers, and to empower frontline workers with empirically-based tools to practice P/CVE.*
> - *Collaboration between researchers and practitioners in the field of CT is crucial. (Such collaboration ensures that research findings are relevant, applicable, and useful in informing policy decisions, shaping counter-terrorism strategies, and implement effective practices).*
> - *More integration of studies outside of terrorism and extremism that directly impact counterterrorism studies.*
> - *Terrorism studies is very Euro-centric with very few voices getting space from the global south.*
> - *A truncated focus on non-state actors divorces terrorism studies from a plethora of fruitful research avenues and research findings from disciplines not traditionally associated with terrorism research.*
> - *Terrorism studies should look at the commonalities between domestic and international forms of political violence.*
> - *The establishment of Open Source standards (e.g., sharing data publicly to allow for transparency/replicability of studies; pre-registration of studies' fostering of diamond open-access publishing; and fostering of publication ethics.*

As the first response on this list indicates, the quality of research on terrorism – and counter-terrorism – stands and falls with the quality of data. While this is less of a problem with qualitative, field research and in-depth case studies, it is a big problem when it comes to cross-country comparisons requiring matching quantitative data. There are a number of long-running international data gathering effors like ITERATE [International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events, by Ed Mickolus][13] and the Global Terrorism Database [GTD by the University of Maryland's START project][14] which are widely used, although their shortcomings become evident when one compares their coverage of a particular country with the much more in-depth

coverage of national databases (e.g., the MOTRA database of the German Federal Crime Office[15] mentioned earlier). The fact that different databases use different definitions of terrorism, and change collection practices, complicates data-gathering and the making of valid longitudinal comparisons. Due to the high costs of maintaining databases, many promising systematic data gathering efforts (e.g., WITS and MIPT) have ceased to exist.[16] In fact, discontinued databases litter the road of terrorism research.

Respondents also offered a number of additional suggestions as to how to improve the quality of research. The issue of funding came up repeatedly in the answers we received: when researchers and institutes depend on outside, usually governmental funding, the research priorities are generally shaped by the policies of the day. When funding dries up, as it has in certain countries, it is difficult to maintain acquired expertise. Finally, the need for greater collaboration and information sharing between scholars and practitioners was frequently mentioned as well.

Translating Research into Policies and Actions

Our 6th question was: *"Which insights from terrorism research have not been (sufficiently) translated into operational instruments that can be used by policy-makers to have a measurable impact on preventing/reducing/countering/terrorism?"* Here is a representative sample of the answers we received:

> *- Most insights are not translated into operational instruments because politics tends to overrule research findings. Only insights that align well with preferred politics at any point in time seem to get traction.*
> *- The gap is in some respects growing, just as the field of study is hitting its stride (empirically and theoretically), partly because of the complexity of new findings and the rising and incompatible institutional pressures in the intelligence and academic communities.*
> *- How technology can be used more effectively for combating terrorism, beyond the removal of extremist materials from social media platforms and websites*
> *- Researchers rarely provide conclusions and insights that are actionable. The question would be much easier to answer if it were put the other way: What research has successfully made the transition? Another risk is that some policymakers like to cherry-pick conclusions from terrorism research that support desired actions, and researchers go along with this.*
> *- Some scholars have argued for a public health approach to countering radicalisation/violent extremism, but we've seen relatively few policies or actionable recommendations in this regard.*
> *- Most policy recommendations from academia and think tanks are too broad to be implemented or too aggressive to work within the trappings of government processes.*
> *- Mental health issues have been identified in the research, but almost nothing is being done to address mental health as part of P/CVE.*
> *- In general terms, research that demonstrates the importance of restraint and respect for human rights tends to gain little traction.*
> *- The insight that terrorism is a relatively small security risk when compared to other dangers. Many CVE/CT measures (such as aerial bombardment, drone strikes, or surveillance programmes like PREVENT) are too expansive and invasive and therefore produce blowback effects. Instead, more resources should be provided for the actual prevention of terrorism.*

In various quarters of our field, the sentiment exists – as reflected in several of the responses we received – that academic research is further ahead than policy, and that many governments adhere to policies based on outdated insights. While some academics complain that their recommendations are not sufficiently listened to, CT professionals and policy-makers in government often complain that the advice they receive from academics is not implementable, given the political (and financial) constraints that determine counter-terrorism policies and measures to prevent and counter violent extremism. As a result, there is still a clear gap between research and practice – one that still need to be further addressed.

Our 7th question was: *"What preventative measures work best to discourage (young) people from radicalising and entering terrorist/extremist trajectories?"* Here is a representative list of the responses we received:

   - Integrating young persons into communities – through work, education and social options.
   - Measures that improve (young) people's quality of life and their sense of meaning and belonging. Effective social policies reducing political grievances and experiences of marginalisation. Fair and just societies.
   - Not sure preventative measures have that effect, but making known the negative effects of involvement has been shown to play a deterring role.
   - Restrictions on traveling to hotspots of terrorist activity.
   - Providing non-extremist, non-violent opportunities for self-fulfillment, identity formation, group belonging, developing career paths. Examples include volunteer work, community work, international travel, organised sports, including extreme sports.
   - Aarhus model works best to my knowledge.[17]
   - The creation of viable and relevant alternative futures. Providing susceptible individuals with a sense of hope that their future will improve if they de-radicalise and disengage from terrorism requires real solutions
   - When we discuss this issue with our colleagues, we find three preventative measures to discourage especially young people: the first is to develop local communities' capabilities.
   - The second one is increasing the level and quality of education. The third one is to inspire them to engage in nonviolent social activities.
   - Providing a solid information literacy in schools, and integrating minority groups as much as possible.
   - Jobs, food and the effective delivery of needed public services would eliminate 90% of what "radicalises" people.

Not all preventative measures work the same way, so comprehensive measures are needed to address the various motivations underlying youth radicalisation. Firstly, measures which educate, empower and support families, educators and the broader community are necessary as an alert system on what radical signs to look out for as well as how to mitigate against them. Secondly, criminalising participation in radical extremist groups, penalising consumption, and dissemination of extremist materials, online and offline, and travel restrictions to terrorist hotspots send an unambiguous and strong message to young people to stay away from terrorism. Prevention is best looked at in stages - at the general level policies that promote democratic

values and critical thinking along with strategies such as preemptively removing terrorist content online work well. For an at-risk group prevention needs to be more targeted and direct and involve contact points who have access to the population such as parents, religious/community leaders or social workers. These persons also need to be supported through psychological counseling and other activities. Finally, for already radicalised individuals the focus needs to be on rehabilitation, exit strategies and reintegration.

While everybody agrees (at least in theory) with Benjamin Franklin's observation that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure", the questions of when, where and how to prevent radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism are often lacking clear answers. Prevention becomes more controversial – and costly – as one moves from late downstream prevention to midstream and upstream prevention.[18] The more one moves upstream, terrorism prevention, crime prevention, and prevention of other socially undesirable behaviour among young people merge and become one and the same. Upstream prevention is admittedly expensive, as it means whole-of-society interventions at an early age on the family- and school-level, and involves the taking of pro-active state measures for integrating marginalised young people into society.

Themes of justice, empowerment and societal integration appear in many of these responses. What needs to be done is quite clear to many respondents: giving young people the tools and opportunities to integrate into society, so that they can find a meaningful role for themselves. However, where governments and political parties are weak and corrupt, and where the market forces are unable to create decently paid jobs for millions of young people wishing to enter the labour market and build for themselves decent lives, a number of less desirable alternatives offer themselves. If avenues to lead a normal life are blocked, tempting alternatives include emigration to become a foreign fighter, joining a criminal gang at home or an organised crime network abroad, seeking a sense of belonging in a religious cult or becoming part of a terrorist group. If the solution to radicalisation is to create – as one respondent suggested – "fair and just societies" – the reality is that there is either a lack of political will, an absence of economic opportunities, or a shortage of necessary resources in most countries to do so. While many of the "have-nots" are living lives of quiet desperation or drown their unachievable aspirations in alcohol and narcotic drugs, a few radicalise, determined to change a system which they (and others) perceive as unfair. Some young people radicalise constructively, becoming social carriers for constructive change, while others turn to destruction. For governments, repression of calls for justice and equality is often more tempting and – in the short run – cheaper than accommodating reasonable demands from sectors of the public that are marginalised. Historically, the choice of terrorism as a strategy of protest and revolt has, despite occasional tactical gains, generally had a very low probablility of success.[19]

Our 8th question was: *"Which [non-violent] CVE interventions can, in your view, best persuade already radicalised militants to disengage from violent extremist and terrorist groups?"* Here are some of the answers we received:

> *- Most extremists and terrorists – if circumstances allow – simply mature out of their involvement, unless they have reached a point where it is straightforwardly rewarding to perpetuate or deepen one's involvement. We need to make sure the costs exceed the rewards, and provide logical alternative life choices and careers that are meaningful for*

those that will inevitably be seeking to moderate their involvement.
- Getting people to disengage after they've already been radicalised is extremely diffi-cult. Interpersonal interventions are probably best; I think the significance of engaging formers in this activity has been overstated, but they are more motivated and probably not worse at it than others.
- Countering radical ideologies and narratives by promoting moderation, pluralism and peaceful co-existence. These ideas can be inculcated in militant rehabilitation programmes and counternarratives messaging. The first is to provide an effective counter-ideology narrative that investigates the promotion of moderation, pluralism, and peaceful co-existence counter-narratives, and for the "right" messenger to deliver this message – someone who resonates with the militant in question.The second is to put in place a well-resourced deradicalisation programme that is long- term in nature as the radicalised person is likely to require continuous monitoring, mentoring and support at an ideological and social level.
- Good governance; opportunity; in the case of religiously linked ideologies debunking their religious claims; and amnesty.
- A client-centric, individually tailored approach addressing individual risk factors and needs, focusing on behavioral learning and experiences with a multi-professional team and based on voluntary participation. However, there is very little evidence for any of the tools and methods used in this field (lack of Randomised Control Trials, quasi experiments etc.).
- One-on-one interventions using whatever tools may address that person's issues, from mental health counseling, to ideologically countering narratives, to taking the individual away from the environment of radicalisation so they're out of the echochamber.
- Engaging their families in the disengagement effort.
- I fear that deradicalisation is largely not as effective as it should be. I believe that is mostly because we do not have enough resources allocated to deradicalisation processes. - Another major challenge is that we do not have credible and genuine Islamic and religious scholars that are committed to deradicalisation. From my decade-long experience in Afghanistan, I come across many so-called pro-government Islamic scholars that held the same views as Daesh and the Taliban. With such a mentality, how could we expect them to engage in a serious discussion with a hardcore terrorist and convince him to give up fighting?
- The best approach is, of course, often very challenging, addressing the root causes of the conflicts or the justifications terrorists utilise in addition to offering a kind of immunity to the members of terrorist organisations, in a way extending them an olive branch while offering them a sense of reaching at least part of their objectives.
- There is likely no one way – it is an intersection of many different approaches, that include inclusion, safety, community, and the like.

In recent years, the gradual shift from armed interventions against terrorism, driven in part by the evident lack of lasting results of kinetic approaches in many instances, has led to a multitude of de-radicalisation projects and countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes, not only in Western democracies. To be effective, these need to be well-designed, well-funded, well-staffed and well-implemented. Most experts recognise that this is indeed challenging. Comprehensive,

tailored, community-based approaches, such as the so-called Danish "Aarhus model", appear to be most promising.[20] In recent years a veritable CVE industry has developed in some countries, yet the evaluation of the methods used lags behind. This is not to imply that most CVE initiatives lack effectiveness, but period evaluations from the outside would certainly make them more effective, as well as provide meaningful insights for other efforts. Many responses to our survey also referred explicitly or implicitly to Islamist-inspired radicalisation. However, the ability of CVE efforts to adjust to new extremist threats is also a significant challenge for research and practice – one that remains so far unanswered.

Our 9th question was: *"What are the best ways to counter the narratives that militant individuals and organisations use to justify the use of terrorism as acceptable for redressing grievances?"* If terrorism is viewed as a combination of violence and communication[21], countering terrorism should focus as much on countering the communicative narratives of terrorists as on their indiscriminate violence. Sadly, this has not been the case. This is arguably the biggest mistake of past and present counter-terrorist policies. Here we received many valuable – and sometimes sceptical – suggestions, to include the following:

> *- Taking these justifications seriously, examining the sources of these justifications (whether they are based on some aspect of reality or simply conspiracy theories) – being able to question individuals on their sources for the information upon which they base their justifications is key and involves an ability to listen without interrupting. Then, based on the findings, developing a counter-narrative that 1) acknowledges the factual bases of the justifications (yes, we made mistakes; atrocities were indeed committed; policies were hasty, ill-judged, had unexpected consequences); 2) addresses issues such as apologies, alternative forms of redress such as compensation, policy reform; 3) demonstrates the non-factual basis of conspiracy theories and the untrustworthiness of information sources while acknowledging why militant individuals and organisations might be drawn to them, albeit erroneously.*
>
> *- Have a robust and rapid ability to push counternarratives out along multiple channels. Counternarratives must not only refute the claims of militants, but must also highlight their hypocrisy and the downsides of violence (i.e., both "offensive" and "defensive" or proactive AND reactive counternarratives).*
>
> *- De-legitimisation of their ideology + explanation of non-efficiency of terrorism as a method of promoting interests. Present evidence showing that most terrorist groups fail, that many members – leaders and followers – will eventually be defeated, either being killed or ending up in prison. Give examples of terrorist groups in democracies that eventually entered the legitimate political process.*
>
> *- Mass counter-narrative activities usually don't reach the target populations as they might be deemed as enemy propaganda. Instead, offering them an exit strategy that significantly reduces possible sentencing and also giving them a sense of success by providing some kind of changes in policies which would, as a result, diminish the grievances or other possible justifications.*
>
> *- Different groups have different narratives. The best way is to deeply analyze the narratives, understand them in a serious way, then disprove, neutralise or delegitimise key points.*
>
> *- The most persuasive counter narratives are those which are organic, short, crisp and*

colloquial. Moreover, they should appeal to human emotions, aspirations, fears and expectations instead of just offering counterfactual accounts in response to radical concepts and ideologies.
- Available evidence suggests there is no effective way, except maybe inocculation of people long before exposure. Winning the hearts and minds of local community leaders is the cure for terrorist narratives.
- To counter the narratives of terrorists and their outfits, I think we have to properly expose them in things that they do against their own principles. We, as a CT force that intends to counter the narrative of terrorists, have to gain the trust of our audience and promote narratives that are genuine. Promoting false narratives against terrorist organisations can always backfire and cost the counter-terrorists their credibility.
- Use insider voices, be emotionally compelling, use religion when necessary, offer redirection and alternative answers.
- This [i.e. counter-narratives] works best when a private tech company partners with a local credible voice entity that has digital literacy.
- We are all familiar with the lack of empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of counter or alternative narratives. There is some recent research that suggests that online interactions can be used to put individuals at risk of radicalisation in contact with local providers of support services. The findings suggest there is some cause for optimism here.
- To counter extremist narratives governments should govern well, in the interests of their citizens.
- I don't believe these [i.e. counter-narratives] have been remotely effective, nor do I believe there is convincing evidence for their effectiveness.

One of the more depressing aspects of countering violent extremism is that some of the narratives of terrorists have such a high degree of credibility with some vulnerable members and groups in society. It remains amazing how more than forty thousand young men and women from more than sixty countries believed the narrative of the Islamic State (Daesh) in 2014 and moved to Syria and Iraq. It remains equally amazing that after the military defeat of the Islamic State in its heartland and the exposure of its inability to live up to the promises Daesh made to its followers, there are still thousands in and outside the camps in Syria and Iraq who continue to adhere to the IS narrative.

Counter-narratives to undermine extremist narratives must – to be credible – be genuine and authentic (rather than slick PR marketing campaigns), backed up by deeds that match words. Many of the recommendations made by our respondents make good sense, yet their adoption and implementation by government agencies and civil society organisations remains a challenge. However, it is undeniably cheaper to invest in the development of persuasive narrative strategies than to invest in large scale armed operations.

Future Contexts Shaping Research on Terrorism and Counter-terrorism

Finally, our 10th question was about "horizon scanning": *"What are the main issues or developments (related to terrorism, counter-terrorism, national security, global politics, financing, etc.) that could affect your organisation in the coming years – positively or negatively?"* In other words, what are the good and the bad things that we can expect in the near future when it comes to research on countering terrorism and which developments are likely to have an impact on it? Here is a representative list of the answers we received which focus on "<u>positive</u>" developments:

> *- The quality of terrorism research will rise further as the scientific standards of the field have been evolving over the last years.*
> *- A broader focus on extremism and terrorism than mainly jihadism.*
> *- Student interest in terrorism and extremism remains strong; there is an ongoing demand for research.*
> *- We are more and more used by the government to advise on counter-terrorism.*
> *- In the last decade there has been a surge in the number of well-informed, well- trained, and gifted scholars in the field – and many are well integrated internationally. The human capital is in place, as never before, to foster significant advances on all fronts.*
> *- Many organisations have gained considerable experience over the last 20 years since the adoption of Resolution 1373 (2001). The UN should discharge some of the mandate of its different CT Committees to regional organisations, in the framework of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage.*
> *- Recognition of the importance of security issues in national, European, and trans-Atlantic policy; regional development; needs of security institutions to cooperate with the academic sphere; and new developments in cyberspace.*

There was a near consensus among the respondents that the quality of much terrorism research is good and continues to improve. But on the other hand, many concerns were expressed about the future, including widespread agreement that funding for terrorism research will more than likely decline as other priorities take precedence.[22] Here is a representative list of the answers we received which focus on "<u>negative</u>" developments:

> *- Less focus on, and resources for, CT/CVE due to government focus on great power competition and other topics, and as the concept of national security evolves.*
> *- How the shift to great power competition in the strategic priorities of most countries is going to affect both terrorism trends and counterterrorism responses.*
> *- In the US, unfortunately, the administration matters. If Trump were elected again, it would be another giant pause in our ability to do scientific research.*
> *- Finding sufficient stable funding is an ongoing challenge.*
> *- The possible decline of financing of security research as a consequence of austerity measures to stabilise public finances.*
> *- Due to the actual political developments, the focus of attention will change from non-state actors to state actors. Therefore, I suppose that researchers will leave the field to focus on other issues (so the problem of "transient" researchers, that terrorism research always had, will even more increase).*
> *- A limited number of new young researchers in the research on terrorism/extremism,*

limiting research innovation.
- For us in the US, extremism has seeped into mainstream politics to such an extent that empirical research is less valued or is politicised in some quarters.
- The politicisation and polarisation of extremism research, in that everyone already comes with pre-conceived notions and a refusal to change minds based on research findings.
- The loss of interest by Donors and Technical Assistance Providers, as International Terrorism is not perceived as a global threat as it was 20 years ago. So there will be less action, less funding and less support to capacity building programmes, run by multilateral institutions. Priority will be given to bilateral support.

The crucial question is: how much should governments and civil society invest in countering terrorism, and how much should one invest in other life-threatening events? While terrorism is not the deadliest danger to our way of life in most countries, its brutal, norm-violating nature, involving unprovoked attacks by lawless perpetrators on unarmed civilians and its proven ability to provoke massive overreaction by governments, leading to infringements on fundamental rights and liberties and undermining the rule of law – warrants more attention than simple casualty figures suggest.

There is also still plenty of research that needs to be done. Here, for instance, are six crucial topics proposed by experts who responded to our pre-survey questionnaire:
- What will be the short-, medium- and long-term effects of the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan on terrorism/counter-terrorism?
- With its rising terrorism levels, will Africa pose a major threat beyond the continent?
- How to tackle the root causes for radicalisation abroad?
- What explains the rise of right-wing terrorist threats around the world?
- How does polarisation in liberal Western societies feed terrorism?
- How can we fight terrorism that is supported from within the political mainstream?

Conclusions

The subject under review – terrorism and violent extremism – is difficult and at times even dangerous to research. Studying terrorism has proven difficult, both in terms of fieldwork and access to government data. Counter-terrorism is difficult to research, as secrecy and lack of transparency are major obstacles. Governments do not like to see shortcoming and failures exposed. Counter-terrorism, especially "Counter-productive counter-terrorism" – a term coined by the late Paul Wilkinson – is therefore a field that is still under-explored. In many countries, more is publicly known about terrorism than about counter-terrorism.

Nevertheless, there has been very substantial progress in both quality and quantity of research, as many respondents to our survey highlighted. This is encouraging for our field. Yet, much more needs to be done, as the field continues to evolve with new trends emerging, more data becoming available, and new research skills and methodologies being required.

The level of cooperation between governments and academia in analysing terrorism and

violent extremism has improved over the years as well in a number of countries, but still leaves much to be desired. While many government agencies possess formidable in-house research capabilities – not infrequently of equal quality as those in academia – their ability to think outside the (political and security) box is more limited. However, both sides would benefit from greater cooperation and cross-fertilisation. Scientific research should guide evidence-based policies and practices, but for that policy-makers and practitioners should be better at sharing priorities and making data accessible.

Another important trend in the past decade has been the shift away from purely kinetic counter-terrorism responses in many countries, dominated by the military, police and special forces, to include nonviolent measures of countering violent extremism. However, the difficulty of showing measurable results in this area has kept funding for countering violent extremism policies limited, and even more so for measuring the prevention of terrorism. Arguably one of the biggest problem of counter-terrorism has been its over-reliance on force and its under-reliance on communicative and preventative instruments to address terrorism and violent extremism.

To conclude, our central goal in this effort was to take the pulse on the state of research in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. In addition to providing food for thought or ideas for debate, we also hope that these insights will inspire new avenues of research, especially for the emerging generation of scholars in this field.

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Endnotes

1 Alex P. Schmid, James J.F. Forest and Timothy Lowe. "Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 15, Issue 3 (June 2021), pp. 142-152. URL: https://pt.icct.nl/article/terrorism-studies-glimpse-current-state-research-202021; Alex P. Schmid, James J.F. Forest and Timothy Lowe. "Counter-Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 15, Issue 4 (August 2021), pp. 155-168. URL: https://pt.icct.nl/article/counter-terrorism-studies-glimpse-current-state-research-20202021.

2 The profile question focused on the respondents' background and position within their organisation/institute/centre, think tank or programme.

3 For a list of the 28 respondents to the pre-questionnaire, see the Acknowledgments at the end of this Research Note.

4 Due to the fact that ten respondents indicated being in more than one category, more than 50 affiliations had to be counted. The names of the 50 respondents to the main questionnaire can also be found in the Acknowledgments.

5 In this and the following questions "organisation" can – for brevity's sake – also refer (unless otherwise specified) to institutes, centres, think tanks, programmes or (international) organisations.

6 MOTRA is an acronym standing for 'Monitoringsystem und Transferplattform Radikalisierung'. It is a 5 year project of five project partners, led by the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA). Project coordinator is Dr. Uwe Kemmesies from the German Federal Criminal Office. For information, see: https://www.motra.info.

7 Cf. Francis Haugen. *The Power of One. How I found the strength to tell the truth and why I blew the whistle on Facebook.* New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2023.

8 Cf. Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation of Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* March 2014, pp. Vol. 26, Issue 4, pp. 565-580. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895649.

9 See, for instance: Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy. "Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis*."* *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 5, pp. 2-12. URL: https://pt.icct.nl/article/stochastic-terrorism-and-incitement-violence-linguistic-and-psychological-analysis.

10 For an early list of instances of contagion terrorism, see: Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf. *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: SAGE, 1982, pp.128 – 136.

11 Cf. Caroline Logan (Ed.) Special Issue: Violent Extremism: A primer for mental health practitioners. The *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*. June 2021.

12 Stefanie Mavrakou, Emelie Chace-Donahue, Robin Oluanaigh & Meghan Conroy (2022) The Climate Change–Terrorism Nexus: A Critical Literature Review, Terrorism and Political Violence, 34:5, 894-913; Graham Macklin (2022) The Extreme Right, Climate Change and Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence, 34:5, 979-996

13 ITERATE's annual terrorist attack data files go back to 1960. They are sold by Vinyard Software, Inc., 502 Wandering Woods Way, Ponte Vedra, Florida 32081-0621, USA (Email: Vinyardsoftware@hotmail.com).

14 The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START] reaches back to 1970. See: http://www.start.umd.edu/. For an overview and discussion of databases on terrorism, see: Neil G. Bowie. 'Terrorism Events Data: An Inventory of Databases and Data Sets, 1968–2017' *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 12, Issue 5. URL: https://pt.icct.nl/article/terrorism-events-data-inventory-databases-and-data-sets-1968-2017; and Neil Bowie's update '30 Terrorism Databases and Data Sets: A New Inventory' in *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 14, Issue 1. URL: https://pt.icct.nl/article/30-terrorism-databases-and-data-sets-new-inventory.

15 See: URL https://www.motra.info.

16 WITS stand for Worldwide Incidents Tracking System. MIPT stands for Memorial for the Prevention of Terrorism. Both databases are described in Neil G. Bowie and Alex P. Schmid. Databases on Terrorism. In: Alex P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011, on pp. 298-302 and pp.307-310 respectively. In the same chapter of the Handbook, descriptions of the GTD and ITERATE can also be found, among those of many other databases.

17 For details on this, see: European Commission, "Aarhus Model: Prevention of Radicalisation and Discrimination in Aarhus," 2019. URL: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/aarhus-model-prevention-radicalisation-and-discrimination-aarhus_en.

18 See Alex P. Schmid (Ed.) *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness.* The Hague: ICCT, 2021. URL: https://www.icct.nl/handbook-terrorism-prevention-and-preparedness.

19 Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki. *How Terrorist Groups End. Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida.* St. Monica: RAND, 2008. URL: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741-1.html.

20 For a brief discussion of the Aarhus model, see: Nina Käsehage. Prevention of Radicalization in Western Muslim Diasporas. Chapter 11 in: Alex P. Schmid (Ed.). *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*. The Hague: ICCT,2021, pp. 299-302.

21 Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf. *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media.* London: Sage, 1982. Levi J. West. *Violent Propaganda: Violence, Communication and Technology – The Strategic Logic of Terrorism*. Melbourne: Victoria University (Doctoral dissertation).

22 Global death from terrorism fell in 2022 by 9 percent compared to 2021 to 6,701 deaths, according to the Global Terrorism Index. Institute for Economics and Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2023.* Sidney: IEP, 2023, p 2. URL: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources/global-terrorism-index-2023/. While this is probably an under-estimate, it is nevertheless clear that there are many other man-made calamities that cause many more casualties. Conflicts between parties whereby both sides are armed cost some 250.000 annual casualties in recent years. - For a discussion of active armed conflicts in 2022 [n =33], see *Armed Conflict Survey* 2022. Vol.8. URL: https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2022/armed-conflict-survey-2022/.

About

Perspectives on Terrorism

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