

[Interview] Counterterrorism expert Thomas Renard: 'Everyone is struggling to identify how to best respond to extremism'

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Counterterrorism expert Thomas Renard. "The rise of far-right extremism also means that security services now need to focus on a much larger group of people".

Thomas Renard is Director of the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague. In his book *'The Evolution of Counter-Terrorism since 9/11'*, he traces the evolution of counterterrorism policy in Belgium and Europe, a field that has expanded dramatically since the 9/11 attacks, and one in which the limits between terrorism and extremism have become blurred. ***'These days, a much, much larger pool of individuals is drifting towards extremist ideas and narratives.'*** An interview.

Can you briefly sketch current developments in extremism and terrorism?

"Here in Europe, right-wing and anti-institutional extremism, and jihadi terrorism are the three dominant forms of extremism and terrorism that we're dealing with. We also see a little bit of left-wing extremism, such as the Antifa movement, which is partially a response to the resurging far-right extremism.

From a European perspective, the threat of religious and specifically jihadi terrorism and extremism has been decreasing in recent years. This is a significant shift from the heydays of the ISIS Caliphate era, between roughly 2013 and 2017, when ISIS was the dominant threat and almost the only one that security services and counterterrorism (CT) researchers were focused on.

In the Middle East and Africa, the threat of religious terrorism still remains high. But in Europe, the risk of a terrorist attack is lower now, as religious terrorist groups are less powerful, less organised, and less able to inspire a sophisticated attack, although there is always the risk of isolated individuals doing something.

However, in the last few years, we are seeing a resurgence of other forms of extremism, often linked to the far- or extreme right and to so-called 'anti-institutional' movements. These days, a much, much larger pool of individuals is drifting towards extremist ideas and narratives. These individuals are not necessarily involved in violent activities, nor supportive of them, but there is a risk that some of them could become radicalised. The danger of this development is that extreme ideas are becoming more mainstream and accepted. This could slowly undermine the democratic values that we currently take for granted in Europe and North America.

The rise of far-right extremism also means that security services now need to focus on a much larger group of people. Here in the Netherlands, for example, the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) estimates (<https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/documenten/publicaties/2023/05/25/anti-institutioneel-extremisme-in-nederland-een-ernstige-dreiging-voor-de-democratische-rechtsorde>) that there are around one hundred thousand individuals with 'anti-institutional' sympathies. In Germany, the so-called *Reichsbürger* movement, a far-right anti-government movement has some 23,000 affiliates (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/banning-designating-disarming-legal-implications-counteracting-reichsburger-movement>) alone. When you add in other forms of right-wing extremism, Identitarian movements or believers of conspiracy theories like QAnon, the number of individuals leaning towards extremism in Germany is likely to be way above a hundred thousand individuals. So, all over Europe, that's a massive number of people that we are talking about. But again, it is *extremism* that has been rising, whereas terrorism has been decreasing over the past few years."

What are your thoughts about the connection between the COVID crisis and the building of extremism?

"It was interesting that at the onset of the COVID pandemic, there was speculation that the crisis would exacerbate terrorism. Young people would spend more time online and therefore ran the risk of radicalising and then potentially conduct attacks. There was also speculation that vaccination centres would be attacked. And yes, although that happened here and there, it was really nothing comparable to what was being speculated about. So, COVID did not have a significant impact on the terrorist threat.

However, it *did* have a massive impact on the extremist landscape. COVID has been a real incubator for a lot of right-wing extremist and anti-establishment movements and ideas. It was a particularly destabilising global crisis that has led to widespread anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, and a social malaise that has eroded people's trust in the ability of governments to steer societies safely through uncertain times. The increase of conspiracy

theories has also been used to support and boost a number of extremist ideas and movements.

Having said this, it is very important to distinguish between terrorism and extremism. Terrorism is a security threat at its core, as it is the threat of the use of violence to destabilise a democratic society. Extremism, on the other hand, is much more of a societal challenge. Extremism offers to challenge and undermine a democratic society, but not necessarily by using violence; it has a broader portfolio of options for destabilisation, including using legal means to achieve its goals. However, as the numbers are much higher, extremism is extremely difficult to tackle.”

What are the options to counter extremism, how can we best respond to it?

“Well, as it is a societal challenge, we will need to respond to the *root causes* of extremism and to the conducive environment. We need to look at the declining trust that citizens feel in public institutions, in the media, and in politics at large, - not just the ruling government, but politics at large.

We will need to rebuild trust or create new social contract between the state and the citizens. And this would not be a ‘counter-terrorism (CT) response’, nor a ‘preventing and countering violent extremism’ (P/CVE) response. This needs a broader ‘whole of society’ and a ‘whole of government’ kind of response.

But to be honest, I have not yet seen a compelling answer to the evolving extremism challenge. Everyone is struggling to identify how to best respond to it. We can all see the declining trust, the fragmentation of the societal landscape, and that there is a growing polarisation within societies and within politics. But how to best respond to this? That is extremely complicated. Most of the responses that are now being discussed, outside of the traditional security sphere, consist of: ‘We need more education, more teaching, we need more critical thinking,’ et cetera. And that is great, of course. But our societies have never been as educated as they are today. And somehow, this does not prevent us from drifting towards political polarisation and a lack of trust.”

You have written about counterterrorism responses that, in the last two decades, have blurred the lines between extremism and terrorism. What are the risks stemming from this blurring?

“The main risk is a democratic risk. If we would start deploying the full counterterrorism arsenal against the challenge of, for instance, anti-institutional extremism, or environmental extremism, we might enter an Orwellian society, in which penal responses could be deployed against citizens that have not done anything wrong. I mean, many of these people just don't like the government.

I might sound provocative now, but I do not necessarily like the government either. But we do not *have* to like the government. We all have different ways of thinking about how to handle the problems we face. In a democracy, we can all come up with solutions that fit within the rules and laws. But if you disagree with this and go against the system because you believe it will not solve our problems, then you're seen as an extremist. Do not forget that throughout history, there have been radicals and extremists who actually made society better by challenging the usual way of doing things. But it is a risky path to take.

The other risk of the blurring of lines between terrorism and extremism, is more about politics. Terrorism is politicised, but extremism even more. When we start to move from focusing on violent, harmful actions (terrorism) to focusing on more general extreme ideas (extremism), the bar for what is considered extreme gets lower. This can be used by politicians to make their opponents look bad, like saying they are not legitimate or credible.

In Europe, we are already seeing this play out in political battles. Some governments on the far-right call environmental groups 'eco terrorists', and then those on the far-left accuse right-wing governments of being extreme. So, as we shift the focus from terrorism to extremism, it becomes a tool in politics to label and criticise each other. This makes the already-existing problem of our divided society even worse. It becomes a vicious cycle where everyone is accusing the other of being evil. So, figuring out how to break this cycle, is a big challenge we need to face."

Do you have an example of where this vicious cycle actually has been broken?

"Hmm, that's a tricky one.... Well, in Northern Ireland, terrorism stopped for about ten years. There was a change in what people paid attention to, and things got quieter for a while, although the tensions have resurfaced lately. Several factors played a role in the success story of Northern Ireland. There was a realisation that no one really wins in situations like this. And the European Union also played its part by offering financial support to the region, and giving it access to the European market.

And if we look back, there have been times when a new crisis helped us move past an ongoing one. Take the United States, for instance. Environmental or 'eco- terrorism' was a big concern there until the 9/11 attacks happened. That event made us reevaluate things. Similarly, anarchist terrorism was a major worry before World War One, but that threat also faded afterwards. I'm not saying that we need a huge crisis or war, but sometimes a shift in focus can help. The problem then becomes less important in the grand scheme of things, which helps to mitigate the risk of over-reaction and the threat loses its momentum."

You mentioned that there have been some environmental groups that have used terrorism as a tactic to pursue their goals. Do you think that there is a risk that this could happen again in the future?

“We see discussions around the potential radicalisation of certain environmental movements. Are some, or parts of these movements evolving from radical activism towards extremist activism, and potentially towards violent extremism?”

This is an open discussion, because historically, there have been environmental groups, like the Earth Liberation Front in the United States, which have used terrorism as a tactic to pursue their objectives. So, radicalising environmental groups in itself is nothing new. But with the climate crisis - which will year on year become more salient - and with the obvious limitations in the government's capacity to address this massive challenge, some are fearing that climate activism could derail in the future.

Climate change in itself could also exacerbate environmental migration, which in turn could increase migration towards Europe, which is more protected from climate change than Sub Saharan Africa or the Middle East. And this growing climate migration could then further exacerbate the European far-right extremism, which could all feed into a destabilising and potentially toxic cycle.”

When you are talking about environmental extremism, or ‘eco-terrorism’, do you mean groups like Extinction Rebellion, or any other specific groups here in Europe?

“Let me be clear, Extinction Rebellion is an activist movement that is explicitly nonviolent. But as I just said: radicalising environmental groups are nothing new. Do not forget that it was only in 2004 when the FBI considered the Earth Liberation Front to be the main domestic threat in the United States.

In the current discourse about environmental activism, we hear two things. On one side, some people within these groups can start thinking more radically, wondering what the next step could be to get attention for their cause. In the past, this usually meant using non-lethal violence, but who knows what could happen in the future?

On the other side, we see that that in some countries violent far-left activists have infiltrated environmental movements. They exploit environmental demonstrations to escalate clashes with authorities, promoting polarisation.

What is always difficult and sensitive in these conversations, though, is that there are very good, and very legitimate reasons for environmental demonstrations. A protest is a protest, and protesting is what is making a democratic society function. But on the fringes of these movements, you could have individuals that are a little

bit more radical. And within those fringes, you could have a few individuals, that are potentially prone to using violence.

The point is, that within these movements, there is a noticeable trajectory, a growing trend that leans toward extremism, and even potentially violent extremism. This shift is driven by the radicalisation of a portion of the movement, as well as the intertwining with conspiracy theories, or the interference or infiltration from other extremist ideologies. When attempting to pinpoint the source of potential risks, I think we should focus on this intersection of different extremist perspectives. But again, we need to be careful about the way that we frame these problems. We should always remember that, at the end of the day, terrorism is a very marginal phenomenon. There may actually be more people studying terrorism than there are terrorists in this world.”

A recent report by ICCT described how conspiracy theories helped create a transnational far-right movement (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/dutch-flags-and-maple-leaves-how-conspiracy-theories-created-transnational-far-right>). **The far-right would have used protests in the Netherlands (the Dutch Farmers’ Movement) and in Canada (the Canadian Freedom Convoy), both of which capitalised on anti-government sentiments.**

“Yes, the transnational dimension of far-right, anti-institutional extremism and conspiracy theories is very strong, obviously because of the internet. In Europe, in the 1970s and ‘eighties, far-right groups were already trying to build international connections, although that was much more complicated then. Also, the far-right discourses used to be very nationalist - one could perhaps speak to one another and agree up to a certain point - but at the end of the day, nationalists were always a sort of enemies.

Nowadays, however, far-right movements have managed to go beyond the nationalism. They have agreed on a broader narrative, and identified a broader enemy, which is basically ‘the other’. It is ‘the foreigner’, but also ‘the elite’, or ‘the establishment’, or ‘the European Union’. So yes, there are far more transnational connections, and this comes with ramifications, of course.

People like Anders Breivik (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/anders-breivik-terrorist-trial>), who committed the 2011 Norway attacks, or Brenton Tarrant, the Australian far-right extremist who fatally shot 51 people in Christchurch in New Zealand, are still are a source of inspiration (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/15/buffalo-shooting-white-replacement-theory-inspires-mass>) across the world, and notably here in Europe. A few of today’s dominant far-right narratives are originating from some French thinkers, notably the ‘great replacement’ theory (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>), or the ‘great reset’. And the conspiracy theory QAnon

(<https://www.icct.nl/publication/understanding-conspiracist-radicalisation-qanons-mobilisation-violence>), for instance, is very much an American phenomenon. But it has hundreds of thousands of followers, here in Europe. Most of QAnon's theories do not even relate to European social political contexts. And still, people somehow find something in it that speaks to them. This is not something new, but the scale of it, is. And that is quite concerning.

So, the transnational dimension needs to be monitored much more. Because we now see that an idea or an ideology that develops in one country, can then very quickly spread to other countries. And therefore, the lack of a reaction in one country - for instance, of taking a website down, or the failure to arrest individuals circulating these narratives - can have repercussions in another country.”

So, what can policymakers do against this? And is there a role for social media? Should extremist content, fake news or misinformation, be censored?

“Censorship is never the right answer, especially when accusations of censorship are already at play. Instead, it is crucial to address concerns head-on. Often, beneath conspiracy theories and extremist narratives lie very real, genuine, and pressing issues. People might be concerned about their job, about their future, their capacity to pay the rent, or about the future of their children. Acknowledging these concerns is key in identifying the root causes and in formulating appropriate responses.

I might sound somewhat vague now, but I think that to anticipate and address these concerns upfront, and framing the problems in a proper manner, is crucial. You do not have to chase people away by using dismissive labels, saying things like, ‘oh you're a conspiracy theorist’, or ‘oh you're an anti-institutional militant’. That is not going to work, - if anything, that is probably going to backfire.

A more effective strategy, whether as a national politician, a local authority representative, a schoolteacher, or anyone working in the public sector, would be to frame the problems as shared concerns. In a democratic system, you never want to impose your solution; we can have different solutions to different problems. But at the very least, if we can agree on what the problem is, and what the cause of that problem is, we can then narrow down the solutions.

If we can agree that the cause of a certain problem is not aliens or reptiles, nor a generalised abuse of children by the elite, or a Jewish plot, then we can already exclude these myths, which is already a step forward. So, by uniting around common issues like climate change, we could collectively define the problems and work toward solutions.

Meanwhile, the more downstream you go, the more limited your options are. And obviously, at the very end of it, where these crazy ideas about aliens and reptiles are circulating online, you want to be able to react very quickly. You do not want to take these ideas down if they're not illegal. But as soon as they enter the illegal space, then you want to be able to respond very quickly. Collaboration with social media companies is essential. Defining what is acceptable content, and what is not, will be challenging, but once agreed upon, identifying that content, and taking it down is pretty simple.

While progress has been made over the years, it is sometimes frustrating to see that the battle continues, sometimes even regressing. After his take-over, Elon Musk has now successfully turned Twitter into a site where extremists have free rein. And the return of extreme ideologies to mainstream platforms like X (formerly Twitter), amplifies their influence and creates much broader, and much more problematic echo chambers. And that is what we are seeing right now.”

Earlier this year, a Dutch member of parliament sent a public letter to Twitter, complaining about the increasingly hateful and intimidating ways that Dutch politicians are being treated on the platform. As an answer she received an emoji in the shape of a turd.

“Well, look at what happened recently. On his social media platform Truth, former US president Trump posted (<https://apnews.com/article/jan-6-obama-justice-department-capitol-mccarthy-27934bbd095111e7eb2bac5b5bb24e06>) what he claimed was the address of Barack Obama. On that same day, a man was arrested in the neighbourhood with firearms and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. It's not very clear what exactly the plan was, but it all started with Trump disclosing, clearly on purpose, the personal address of Obama, knowing very well that part of his audience is not in love with Barack Obama, to put it mildly. And for a social media platform to tolerate that, that is absolutely problematic.”

Can you discuss the shifting priorities in counterterrorism efforts, particularly regarding the transition from major terrorist threats to the rising concern of extremism?

“A major challenge is resisting the constant urge for innovation. The allure of passing new laws or establishing new agencies for political gain is strong. However, the focus should be on the growing issue of extremism, even as major terrorist threats decline. This creates a dilemma for those working on counterterrorism.

As the terrorism risk reduces, there's less political urgency, budget, and governmental support due to new priorities like organised crime and cybersecurity. This leaves anti-terrorism teams feeling less backed. On the other hand, even with the same amount of resources, they probably have more individuals that they potentially need to monitor. Of course, they cannot watch everyone, but they need eyes in many more places,

especially online. And a lot of this stuff going on there isn't violent, so it's hard to tell if it's really dangerous. But the feeling that 'things are going in the wrong direction, but we're not sure where the danger will come from', is very complicated for the counter-terrorism services.

This situation even endangers democracy. The temptation might be to keep using past approaches -databases, lists, and monitoring - for everyone considered problematic or a danger. Applying this to, say, a hundred thousand people in the Netherlands could lead to a surveillance society like Orwell's '1984.' This should not be our goal and poses its own risks.

To resist this temptation, it is crucial that our government, parliament, and counter-terrorism services understand the clear distinction between extremism and terrorism. Extremism needs attention but is not terrorism. So, treating them alike is not appropriate. This presents a critical challenge.

Another factor to consider, slightly abstract, involves history. In peak terrorism times, counterterrorism roles and preventing extremism drew many experts due to trends. Yet, over time, many of these people have shifted careers. This has led to a substantial loss of expertise. While setups seem unchanged - we still have the same organisations, with the same budgets and amounts of staff - the personnel composition has significantly shifted.

Consequently, we have less-experienced people now, lacking the context to compare past and present challenges. This is less visible institutionally, but evident in conversations. The valuable lessons that were learned during those times have not always been absorbed or documented effectively in the form of a lessons-learned manual. This problem is much more insidious, you do not really see it, you only feel it when you speak with the people. Public sector roles, often five years long, contribute to this cycle. With one cycle ending, a new one begins. Those present during the heyday are fewer, and this continuous learning pattern applies personally too."

Is it possible to rethink or reduce the extensive rules we have established since 9/11 to combat terrorism and extremism?

"Changing course is always an option, even if it's challenging. Once these rules are in place, they tend to stick around. Think of them as legal building blocks - even if some are rarely used, they're part of our laws. Some of these rules might not be effective or necessary, but it's simpler to retain them than to remove them.

For instance, take citizenship stripping as a counter-terrorism approach. It's widely seen as ineffective or even counterproductive. Yet, it might persist due to political advantages, despite its irrelevance in addressing domestic threats like far-right extremism or anti-institutional beliefs.

Consider de-radicalisation programs. I've never been a fan of the term itself, and its effectiveness is debatable. Radicalisation often happens due to personal and contextual factors. As life changes, people often naturally move away from extreme views.

Still, offering personalised support to individuals during challenging life phases is intriguing. This could apply within prison. Now imagine a country like the Netherlands with around forty terrorist offenders behind bars. Providing tailored programmes for them is commendable - not necessarily to de-radicalise, but to assist with their personal issues and reintegration into society.

And then suddenly you find yourself with several hundreds of anti-institutional inmates, or people that adhere to another conspiracy. Are you going to propose these programmes to them as well? I mean, that would be very costly. Would you be willing to put your resources there? This raises questions about fairness and consistency.

This situation calls into question the approach taken with the forty terrorist offenders. Was the selectiveness inadvertently biased or Islamophobic? These concerns echo accusations previously made. Or was it a good approach that simply cannot be offered to all inmates for capacity reasons?

So, to get back to your question: it is not too late to reconsider some counter-terrorism measures. Fighting against undemocratic or risky measures is important. Yet, it is also realistic that certain measures might fade, only to reappear later when threats resurface. In my book, I liken this process to a glacier – it shrinks in summer, expands in winter, and overall grows over time. Well, at least it used to before climate change came into play.”

About Thomas Renard

Dr Thomas Renard is Director of ICCT. His research focuses on (counter-)terrorism and (counter)radicalisation in Europe. His recent research has focused on the evolution of counter-terrorism policy in liberal democracies since 2001, on (returning) foreign fighters, on radicalisation in prison and on terrorist recidivism. His latest book is *The Evolution of Counter-Terrorism since 9/11* (<https://www.routledge.com/The-Evolution-of-Counter-Terrorism-Since-911-Understanding-the-Paradigm/Renard/p/book/9781032035772>) (Routledge, September 2021), whereas his research has been published in many journals and think tanks, including: *International Affairs*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *CTC Sentinel*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *ICCT* or *RUSI*.

He presented his research findings in many policy venues, including the UN Security Council, UN CTED, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the European Parliament, among others, and his recommendations regularly inform global policy discussions. He also contributes regularly to media worldwide (New York Times, Washington Post, Guardian, BBC, Le Monde).

Dr Thomas Renard is also a Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont Institute and at the UNESCO-PREV Chair at the University of Sherbrooke. He sits on a number of scientific committees. He obtained his PhD from Ghent University in 2021, and was awarded the 'Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism' by the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) in 2021. He has a MA in International Affairs from the George Washington University (GWU) and a MA in Journalism from the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL).

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