
Special Research Notes Section: Bart Schuurman, Guest Editor**Using Primary Sources for Terrorism Research: Introducing Four Case Studies****by Bart Schuurman**

Several years ago, Magnus Ranstorp lamented the paucity of publications that critically assess the state of the art in the study of terrorism.[1] A glance at the books and articles published since 9/11 does indeed reveal that such assessments are relatively few in number.[2] These however, are often damning in their critique. Emblematic in this regard is the oft-encountered quote attributed to Michael Howard, a *doyen* of the study of terrorism, who once commented that the field had ‘been responsible for more incompetent and unnecessary books than any other outside ... of sociology. It attracts phoneyes and amateurs as a candle attracts moths.’[3] More recently, Marc Sageman, one of the leading contemporary terrorism scholars, has argued that terrorism research was in a state of ‘stagnation’; despite all the funding that had become available since 9/11 and despite the massive increase in books and articles published on the subject, our understanding of the phenomenon has failed to make significant strides forward.[4] While other internationally-renowned scholars, like John Horgan, Jessica Stern, Alex Schmid and Max Taylor have countered with several examples of evidence-based research that have indeed advanced our understanding of terrorism, Sageman’s polemic at the very least raises some important issues.[5]

One of the problems that Sageman addresses is academics’ lack of access to reliable and detailed data on terrorism. Government agencies frequently possess such information but security concerns prevent them from sharing it, leaving researchers to rely too often on much less detailed and reliable open sources such as newspaper articles.[6] The problem of overreliance on secondary sources of information has been one of the longest-standing issues to affect the study of terrorism.[7] Despite signs of a trend away from reliance on secondary literature and a greater use of primary sources[8], and notwithstanding the encouraging finding that the secondary data problems does not appear to affect all aspects of terrorism research equally[9], much remains to be done. One of Sageman’s suggestions is to produce ‘thick descriptions’; primary sources-based accounts of terrorist groups and incidents that can function as a foundation on which to build and from which to test hypotheses empirically.[10] It is towards this goal that the four Research Notes in this issue hope to make a modest contribution.

The first three articles present rich and detailed descriptions of homegrown jihadist groups in Western countries. These are the Dutch ‘Hofstadgroup’, the German ‘Sauerlandgruppe’ and the large Australian network that became the focus of ‘Operation Pendennis’—that country’s biggest terrorism investigation to date. The fourth article looks at a very contemporary phenomenon, describing the backgrounds of Dutch jihadists who travelled to Syria as “foreign fighters”. All four pieces rely strongly – but not exclusively – on a detailed examination of primary source material. The Hofstadgroup case study utilises police files and interviews with both government stakeholders involved in the investigation and some former group participants. The piece on the Sauerlandgruppe builds on the German court verdict while the Research Note on Operation Pendennis utilises the minutes of courtroom proceedings, court verdicts and interviews with public prosecutors. Exploring the background of Dutch foreign fighters was done on the basis of interviews with several individuals who had observed with their own eyes the changes that these aspiring jihadists went through before journeying to Syria.

The process of gaining access to the primary sources used in these four articles was instructive in several ways. To begin with, the process was distinctly time-consuming. Another problem was that the terms of use

stipulated by the data's owners (usually a government) were sometimes restrictive to an unfortunate (and in our view, unnecessary) extent. This is most apparent in the article on the Sauerlandgruppe, where the author had access to a considerable amount of data gathered by the German police but was ultimately not allowed to use them directly in the Research Note presented here. Despite such setbacks, it was encouraging to realise how much was possible with persistent attempts to gain access. Although it was not always a straightforward process nor was it always clear how and where to apply for permission to use certain files, and although finding interviewees and convincing them to cooperate was especially challenging, patience, perseverance and a portion of good luck more often than not led to a positive outcome.

On behalf of all the authors, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those individuals involved in facilitating our access to the sources mentioned above. A special word of thanks goes out to the interviewees for their time and willingness to help. We hope that readers will find these pieces useful as resources for their own studies on contemporary homegrown jihadism and the foreign fighter phenomenon. Finally, we would like to thank the editors of *Perspectives on Terrorism* for providing us with the opportunity to put together this special Research Notes section.

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Notes

- [1] Magnus Ranstorp, "Mapping Terrorism Studies after 9/11: An Academic Field of Old Problems and New Prospects," in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 13-14.
- [2] Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001): 1-14; *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures* (London / New York: Frank Cass, 2004); Magnus Ranstorp, ed. *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of Art, Gaps and Future Direction* (London / New York: Routledge, 2007); Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Alex P. Schmid (Ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London / New York: Routledge, 2011); Lisa Stampnitzky, "Disciplining an Unruly Field: Terrorism Experts and Theories of Scientific/Intellectual Production," *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 1-19.
- [3] Quoted in: Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama Bin Laden Still Matters," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 136.
- [4] Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 3, September-October 2014: 1-16.
- [5] John Horgan and Jessica Stern, "Terrorism Research Has Not Stagnated," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2013; Jessica Stern, "Response to Marc Sageman's 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2014): 607-613; Alex P. Schmid, "Comments on Marc Sageman's Polemic 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2014): 587-595; Max Taylor, "If I Were You, I wouldn't Start from Here: Response to Marc Sageman's 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2014): 581-586.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 6.
- [7] Cynthia Lum, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alison J. Sherley, "The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies," *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, no. 2 (2006): 8; Silke, "The Devil You Know," 5-7; Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 179.
- [8] Andrew Silke, "Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research," in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Eds.) *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 40-41, 48; Alex P. Schmid, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, ed. Alex P. Schmid (Ed.), op. cit., (2011), 11.

[9] Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?" *Democracy and Security* 9, no. 4 (2013): 372.

[10] Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," 8.