

## Counter-Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)

*Results from a Questionnaire Sent to Scholars and (Former) CT Practitioners*

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### Abstract

*This Research Note follows one presented by the same authors in the June 2021 issue of 'Perspectives on Terrorism' (Vol. XV, Issue 3), which addressed the state of research in the field of Terrorism Studies. The Research Note contains the results of a second questionnaire that asked how researchers assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies. An appendix provides a sample of governmental, intergovernmental, and academic definitions of counter-terrorism. A supplementary bibliography lists the most important literature on the subject.*

**Keywords:** Counter-terrorism studies, research, literature

### Introduction

What is counter-terrorism? While much ink has been spilled on defining terrorism and on developing theories about terrorism, the same is not true for counter-terrorism.[1] Counter-terrorism, as a reactive phenomenon, it would seem, is not in need of much explanation. As a consequence, counterterrorism is, in the words of Daniel Byman, “under-theorized and under-researched.”[2] While there are hundreds of definitions of terrorism, there are far fewer on counter-terrorism.

Next to the term “counter-terrorism,” we also have the less frequently used term, ‘anti-terrorism’. It generally includes a variety of measures and tactics that complement the first of these five categories:

- **coercive** (based on the use of criminal justice and military force);
- **proactive** (based on intelligence preventive work);
- **persuasive** (based on discourse and counter-discourse);
- **defensive** (based on target hardening and societal resilience); and
- **long-term** (based on policies addressing the “root causes” of terrorism.[3])

While some authors use “anti-terrorism” as an umbrella term for all forms of dealing with terrorism, including counter-terrorism, others use it mainly for “defensive measures to prevent the occurrence of terrorism” while they use “counter-terrorism” for offensive measures that are “...designed to respond to a terrorist act.”[4] Yet scholars have also used the term counter-terrorism in a broad sense with its meaning stretched to cover both “soft power” and “hard power” approaches—anticipatory measures as well as reactive responses. The focus of this Research Note is on “counter-terrorism”.

The relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism is one of an intricate interdependence.[5] In theory, one cannot define the one without the other. The broader one’s definition of terrorism, the broader the definition of counter-terrorism must be. The response problem is therefore also a definition problem.[6] There are academic definitions and there are official governmental and intergovernmental definitions of counter-terrorism. (for a brief selection, see Appendix). In both fields, there is no consensus. When it comes to national definitions, this has negative implications for international counter-terrorism cooperation.[7] When it comes to academic definitions, lack of consensus has negative consequences for the accumulation of knowledge, theory-building, and testing.

What then is the state of research in the field of counter-terrorism studies?

### **Questionnaire Overview**

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) developed two parallel questionnaires distributed to around 250 academics and professionals. The first of these two questionnaires invited responses on the state of research on terrorism, and the second asked about the state of research on counter-terrorism. The outcome of the first set of questions was published in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. XV, Issue 3, June 2021).[8] Today, the TRI would like to report on the outcome of the second set of questions. These were the 12 questions we asked members of the research community:

- B(1). What academic discipline(s) contribute(s) most to Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(2). Do you maintain a database of your own on Counter-Terrorism strategies, policies or some other related topic?
- B(3). If someone new to the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies asked you to recommend just one book that would provide the strongest introduction to the field, what would you suggest?
- B(4). Whose recent work on Counter-Terrorism Studies is, in your view, breaking new ground?
- B(5). Where do you see real progress/achievements in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(6). In the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: what are, in your view, the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism?
- B(7). What are the greatest weaknesses/shortcomings in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(8). What type of Counter-Terrorism Studies are, in your view, neglected/shunned for political, religious or other reasons?
- B(9). What can, in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, be considered as positive/negative, “Lessons Learned”?
- B(10). If you were given sufficient time, money and opportunity: which aspect/topic of Counter-Terrorism would you wish to explore in depth?
- B(11). If you had drafted this questionnaire to assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: which question would you have included (and what would be your answer to that question)?
- B(12). If there is anything additional you would like to share about the current situation in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, please do so below.

### **Demographics of Respondents**

Before discussing the results, here are a few remarks about the demographics of the respondents.

The response rate to our questionnaire was about 20 percent (which is low, but not unusually low for this type of questionnaire). Nevertheless, the 47 sets of answers (6 anonymous, 41 with names) we received reveal a glimpse of the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism studies. Unfortunately, fewer respondents answered all the questions in the second questionnaire than in the first. Whether this was “questionnaire fatigue” or lesser interest in, or familiarity with, the subject of counter-terrorism compared to the subject of terrorism—or a combination thereof—we cannot tell.

Of the 47 respondents to this survey, 36 are men and 11 are women. 21 are from the Anglosphere (United

States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia). 16 respondents are from continental Europe (4 of them from [South] Eastern Europe), 5 from Asia, 3 from the Near East, and 2 from (North) Africa. Most of them are either current or former academics, and some have or had close ties to governments (e.g., via think-tanks or national defense universities). Roughly a third (15) of our respondents began researching terrorism before 9/11.

In terms of academic disciplines, a majority of the respondents reported a background in either Political Science, International Relations or Security Studies. A few have a background in Sociology or History. Not unexpectedly, these disciplinary affiliations are to some extent reflected in their responses about which academic disciplines contribute most to Terrorism Studies or Counter-Terrorism Studies:

When asked [Question B(1)]: “*What academic discipline(s) contribute(s) most to Counter-Terrorism Studies?*”, the majority of the respondents (53.2%) opted for Political Science, followed by Psychology (21.3%), Security Studies (14.9%), Legal Studies (14.9%), and Criminology and History (each 12.8%). All the other fields (Sociology, War Studies, Public Policy Studies) got ten percent or less (multiple answers were possible). However, several respondents stressed that counter-terrorism is interdisciplinary, therefore, many disciplines provide valuable contributions.

### **Questionnaire Responses**

In one of our first questions, we wanted to find out which are the seminal texts in the field of counter-terrorism. 36 of the 47 respondents answered this question:

B(3): “*If someone new to the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies asked you to recommend just one book that would provide the strongest introduction to the field, what would you suggest?*”

There was no consensus about the key works in the field. Only five works were mentioned more than once:

**Andrew Silke** (2019): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge (8 mentions, 17%)

**Boaz Ganor** (2005): *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers (4 mentions, 8.5%)

**Martha Crenshaw and Gary LaFree** (2017): *Countering Terrorism*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. (3 mentions, 6.4%)

**Robert J. Art and Louise Richardson** (2007): *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past*. Washington DC, USIP Press. (3 mentions, 6.4%)

**James J. F. Forest** (2015): *Essentials of Counterterrorism*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. (2 mentions, 4.2%)

All the others, including well-regarded studies by Daniel Byman, Ronald Crelinsten, Richard English, John Horgan, Bruce Hoffman, Brian M. Jenkins, Clive Walker, and Paul Wilkinson, received only single mentions.

### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Since many authors (like Andrew Silke above) discuss terrorism and counter-terrorism together in the same volume, and the respondents had already answered a parallel question in the previous questionnaire that dealt with terrorism studies, the current top five list is perhaps not as representative as it would have been if the two questionnaires had not been distributed as one package.

When we asked:

B(4): “*Whose recent work on Counter-Terrorism Studies is, in your view, breaking new ground?*”, we received 38

responses. Two works got more than one response: Andrew Silke, the author of the work just cited, and Joana Cook, author of *A Woman’s Place. US Counterterrorism since 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Yet even Prof. Silke and Dr. Cook were mentioned only twice. Among the single responses reference was made, inter alia, to the works of Max Abrahms, J. M. Berger, Tore Bjørgo, Julia Ebner, and Beatrice de Graaf—in addition to some of those already mentioned in answer to the previous question.

*Discussion and/or Comments*

Given the low responses and even lower consensus rate, no firm conclusions can be drawn about works breaking new ground. Given the size of the literature on counter-terrorism, our respondents might, however, have been unaware of some studies that in the view of the authors of this Research Note do break new ground, e.g.:

Richard J. Chasdi. *Counterterror Offensives for the Ghost War World. The Rudiments of Counterterrorism Policy*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010.

Teun van Dongen. *The Science of Fighting Terrorism: The Relation between Terrorist Actor Type and Counterterrorism Effectiveness*. Leiden: Leiden University Dissertation, 2014.

In recent years (2019–2021) a number of studies have been published which compare CT efforts of countries and which are characterized by academic rigor (see bibliography) that do break new ground. An example is:

Silvia D’Amato, *Cultures of Counterterrorism: French and Italian Responses*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019.

In answer to the related question [B(5)] “Where do you see real progress/achievements in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?”, the following themes came out on top, based on 38 answers:

Related to these themes	Frequency	Percentage
Measuring impacts, effectiveness of counterterrorism	6	12.8%
Online intervention, understanding Internet activity	4	8.5%
Preventing or countering violent extremism efforts	3	6.4%
Multidisciplinary approaches, engagement	2	4.3%
Leadership decapitation, strategic targeting	2	4.3%
Deradicalization	2	4.3%
Research methodologies	2	4.3%
Data collection, availability of primary sources	2	4.3%
Research collaboration	2	4.3%
None	2	4.3%

Among the themes that received only a single mention figured: Synthesis between practice and theory; International co-operation; Connection with organized crime; Rise of non-“Western” focused research.

*Discussion and/or Comments*

Regarding the issue of data collection and availability, one of the deficiencies in the field of counter-terrorism is that there are hardly any publicly available databases on governmental counter-terrorist acts, while there are more than one hundred databases/data sets on terrorist incidents (ITERATE, GTD, etc.).[9]

However, in this regard, there seems to be some good news. We asked the question [B(2)]: “Do you maintain a database of your own on Counter-Terrorism strategies, policies or some other related topic?” We received 45 responses. 11 (24.4%) were affirmative and 34 (75.6%) negative. Yet most respondents who claimed to have a database/data set did not identify it. Among those who did, they usually referred to their own private collection

of interviews or documents, assembled during a recent or ongoing personal or collective research project.

There is still no database in the public domain on counter-terrorism comparable in size and authority with GTD. A very modest beginning has been made with a database with the acronym BAAD [Big Allied and Dangerous]. Yet one of its creators stressed, “The BAAD II has a variable on CT strategy directed at organizations—but it is VERY simple and we need the resources to disaggregate it a LOT more.”[10] One has to go outside the narrow field of counter-terrorism to find a publicly available data set on CT-related state repression. The *Political Terror Scale* (PTS) focuses, however, only on CT practices amounting to state terror and not on legitimate and legal governmental CT measures. It is based on sources like Human Rights Watch (HRW World Report), Amnesty International (AI annual surveys) and the US Department of State (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices). It is led by Prof. Mark Gibney and operated by a small group of professors and part-time researchers based at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and can be consulted at <<https://politicalterror scale.org>>. We are still a very long way away from CT operations being covered as systematically as the acts of non-state terrorists.[11] One reason is lack of governmental funding, another is state secrecy.

In answer to the question [B(6)] “*In the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: what are, in your view, the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism?*” we received 52 responses (as some of the respondents mentioned more than one factor).

Here are the themes that received more than one mention:

Themes related to:	Frequency	Percentage
Effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies, tactics	10	12.8%
Understanding of extremism, radicalization	5	10.6%
The Internet	4	8.5%
Government policy or related	3	6.4%
The role of religion and belief	3	6.4%
Effectiveness of deradicalization and rehabilitation	3	6.4%
Lack of empirical analysis of counter-terrorism cases	2	4.3%
The role of geopolitics	2	4.3%
Research methodologies, data collection	2	4.3%
Counter-terrorism institutions (structures, bias, responsibilities)	2	4.3%

Among the single answers to this question regarding “the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism” figured these: Conspiracy theories; Failure to understand or address root causes of terrorism; Working with communities that generate terrorism; Populist or short-sighted CT measures.

*Discussion and/or Comments*

Somewhat paradoxically, the most frequent answer to this question (referring to the “effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies, tactics”—10 mentions) stands in some contradiction to the most frequent answer to the previous question, where we asked about “real progress/achievements in the field of CT studies” (relating to “Measuring impacts, effectiveness of counterterrorism”—6 mentions). The question about effectiveness is indeed one of the most difficult subjects to understand and assess. When prevention is seen as part of counter-terrorism—which it should—the question arises of how and when to measure non-event outcomes as the success of anti-terrorist measures. The same goes for other CT measures like the effects of decapitation strikes against terrorist leadership. What might be a short-term success (e.g., in the form of a temporary decline in terrorist attacks) can yet turn out to be a medium- or long-term failure.[12]

In answer to the question [B(7)]: “*What are the greatest weaknesses/shortcomings in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?*”, we received 45 answers (including multiple ones) from the respondents. Again, there were almost as many single answers as there were overlapping answers from our respondents.

Themes related to	Frequency	Percentage
Research methodologies	6	12.8%
Lack of comparative research or interdisciplinary collaboration	5	10.6%
Data collection, lack of primary sources	4	8.5%
“Fake” experts	3	6.4%
Limited research scope, “western-centric”	3	6.4%
Effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures	2	4.3%
Lack of holistic conceptualization	2	4.3%
Information and selection bias	2	4.3%
Deradicalization and rehabilitation research	2	4.3%
Failure to address the root causes of terrorism	2	4.3%
Dominance of securitization	2	4.3%
Research engagement	2	4.3%

Among the unique answers, respondents referred to: Influence of security services on research; Community and stakeholder engagement (e.g., religious leaders); Misunderstanding or rejection of societal factors; Events and politics-driven research, Policy-orientated or related; Lack of proactive research; “Hard approaches” (e.g., kinetic measures) are addressed more than “soft approaches” (e.g. reintegration, building resilient communities); Under-representation of “non-Western” scholars.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Here the dominant concern is about research methodology. It is often forgotten that terrorism and counter-terrorism are some of the most difficult subjects to investigate for social scientists as well as others. To interview active terrorists is very dangerous (as many a journalist experienced). Underground organizations are not served by terrorism research and will not cooperate. To interview imprisoned terrorists might produce results that cannot be trusted. Police files, let alone those of intelligence agencies, are usually inaccessible until decades later. Court proceedings are often the closest we can get to understand terrorists and how they were caught. Research funding tends to go to pro-government researchers. While there is a group of researchers belonging to the “critical terrorism studies” camp, their critical attitude is mainly concentrating on what Western democratic governments do wrong in their eyes, while they are largely silent about the crimes of non-state terrorists. As one of the respondents put it: “...the sub-discipline of Critical Terrorism Studies needs to be challenged over its poor and jargon-laden writings on counter-terrorism.”

Counter-terrorism is less difficult to research than terrorism. However, funding is often harder to obtain, and access to data—except historical ones—remains a major problem in all but a few democratic countries. Yet when access to confidential and secret documents is possible, combined with interviews with past and present policy-makers and stakeholders, the results can be very useful, as exemplified by the award-winning doctoral dissertation by Thomas Renard, *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001* (Ghent University, 2021). Another example is the four-volume account of US CT policy developments by Dennis A. Pluchinsky (a senior intelligence analyst in the US Department of State from 1977 to 2005): *Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump – A Chronicle of the Threat and Response* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2020).[13] Such volumes by former government officials tend to require a clearance process so that readers might not get the whole truth from a single source like that.

This issue leads us also to the next question we asked:

B(8) “*What type of Counter-Terrorism Studies are, in your view, neglected/shunned for political, religious or other reasons?*” Here we received 37 responses, with all but five of these unique responses that is, nonoverlapping answers—with “Don’t know” topping the shortlist.

Themes related to	Frequency	Percentage
Don’t know	6	12.8%
Criticism of counter-terrorism methods, approaches	5	10.6%
Role of religion	3	6.4%
“Right-wing” terrorism	2	4.3%
Human and civil rights violations	2	4.3%

Single mentions included: Root cause research; Neuroscience, neurological causes of terrorism; “Left-wing” terrorism; Eco-terrorism studies; Nationalist terrorism; “Soft” counter-terrorism approaches; Gender and terrorism; Negotiation as a method of counter-terrorism; State terrorism; Imprisonment and treatment of “terrorists” in custody; Israel and Israeli counter-terrorism operations; Law enforcement and civil society relations; “Non-Western” approaches to counter-terrorism; Interplay between cultural, religious, ethnic, economic, and other value systems in relation to counter-terrorism; Prison rehabilitation.

*Discussion and/or Comments*

Apart from “Don’t know” which scored highest, the next item mentioned was “Criticism of counter-terrorism methods, approaches.” Since funding for research is often directly, or indirectly, dependent on governments, criticism of government methods is often not welcome despite the fact that it might actually lead to improvements of governmental CT methods and approaches. Another obstacle is—next in line—religion. Researchers regularly are accused of either Islamophobia or Anti-Semitism, depending on the subject of their study. Hate mail and verbal threats against researchers and their families have become widespread, especially since the rise of social media which allows cyber-bullies to hide behind the anonymity of the Internet. This is not confined to sympathizers and supporters of religious extremism; right-wing extremists are also known to intimidate those who wish to study them.

With regard to question [B(9)]: “*What can, in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, be considered as positive/negative, “Lessons Learned”?*” we received 41 responses. Among these were more than a dozen lessons that were only cited once by respondents. Only six “Lessons Learned” were shared by two to 10 respondents:

Themes related to	Frequency	Percentage
Effectiveness of counter-terrorist measures, metrics	10	21.3%
Importance of research collaboration	5	10.6%
Need for a holistic approach to countering terrorism	4	8.5%
Effectiveness of short-term measures (e.g., strategic targeting)	3	6.4%
Limited effectiveness of deradicalization	2	4.3%
“Lone-wolf” actor	2	4.3%
None	2	4.3%

Among the “Lessons Learned” identified by only one respondent figured these: State interference in research; Importance of international counter-terrorism coalitions or related; Stronger understanding of religious terrorism; Comparative methods of countering terrorism in different countries; Importance of contextual re-

search; Priority of securitization; Creation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism; “Root cause” research; Effectiveness of detainment and release policies; Radicalization research; Development of “suspect communities”; Neglect of human rights and civil liberties as drivers of extremism.

#### *Discussions and/or Comments*

For policy makers with a short attention span, “Lessons Learned” should be one of their favorites (next to “Best Practices”) when directly talking to researchers. One problem is that lessons from other countries or from the past or from a different type of terrorism might not or no longer apply. Terrorist methods and techniques change (e.g., use of drones, 3D printing of guns) and what was past is often no good indicator of what comes next.

With these caveats: what are some of the “Lessons Learned” suggested by our respondents? Here are some answers we received:

1. “Detach ourselves from power/administrations, and adopt a stance not as a consultant, but as an academic researcher”;
2. “Positive: Knowledge from comparative studies. Negative: Unclear criteria of effectiveness of counter-terrorist measures”;
3. “Nothing because none whatsoever seems to have persuaded the governments to calibrate their CT approaches consistent with academic recommendations”;
4. “This is difficult because the lesson, more often than not, must be learned by governments and policy makers more than academics. Often, academia knows the problem, but counter-terrorism stakeholders refuse to listen”;
5. “The whole field of deradicalization has produced only the most limited results at great expense. Many of the so-called “experts” are often from Islamist front groups”;
6. “How use of force is often not the solution (on its own) and can be even counter-productive”;
7. “Hard approaches to countering terrorism defeating human rights may not be really effective as it is seen. They only suppress and don’t really address the problem. This is a hard/negative lesson which is still not learned well”;
8. “Counter-Terrorism research is getting more aware of backfire-effects of counter-terrorism (e.g., losing hearts and minds due to civilian casualties by CT-operations”;
9. “A positive lesson is that resolving a conflict’s underlying root causes will support an effective counter-terrorism campaign. A negative lesson learned is that military measures by themselves may be insufficient to resolve a terrorism conflict when other factors are required to address the problems in a comprehensive manner”;
10. “Proactive approaches in CT-studies are increasing (i.e., soft/preventive approaches are getting increasing attention in recent times)”;
11. “Negative: The lack of synergy between CT and CVE studies and efforts. Positive: The emergence of counter-terrorism research centers throughout the world”;
12. “Security and liberty are not rival commodities; respect for human rights promotes security (both in the sense of security against the states, and in the sense of ensuring counter-terrorism legislation does not have counterproductive effects)”;
13. “The awareness, that it is not sufficient to create CT-measures but also to evaluate them carefully to spend resources efficiently and to avoid backfire-effects”;
14. “CT developments post-9/11 have held many important lessons for governments, especially in the West, for how not to counter terrorism. These include the importance of understanding and engaging the human geography of foreign sites in which CT and COIN operations are carried out,



the need for restraint in CT responses to avoid inadvertently fueling the narrative of extremists and terrorists and creating more recruits, the recognition that allies will not always see eye to eye when it comes to CT priorities and that unilateral (or no) action might sometimes be the more effective and efficient route. There is unfortunately no clear-cut way of successfully doing CT or COIN, and context heavily influences success or failure with there always being elements that are beyond the control or influence of governments. There are ways to mobilize non-state actors to help battle against terrorism however, and there is a growing recognition among most (at least in the West) that comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism are required.”

Regarding question [B (10)] “*If you were given sufficient time, money, and opportunity: which aspect/topic of Counter-Terrorism would you wish to explore in depth?*” we received 43 responses of which eight had between two and eight mentions:

Themes related to	Frequency	Percentage
Prevention strategies	8	17%
Artificial intelligence, digital counter-terrorism measures and communications	7	14.9%
History of counter-terrorism, long-term comparative studies (pre-9/11)	3	6.4%
Primary interaction with “terrorists”, “extremists”	2	4.3%
Causes of terrorism	2	4.3%
Assessing measures of effectiveness in counter-terrorism	2	4.3%
Impact of counter-terrorism measures	2	4.3%

Unique responses referring to personal research desiderata covered topics like: Impact of counter-terrorism measures; Deradicalization programs; Strategic targeting, Leadership decapitation; Transnational counter-terrorism cooperation; Comparing the efforts of state and non-state actors to address counter-terrorism; Ideological ecosystems; Terrorism financing; Quantitative analysis; Subnational variation in counter-terrorism organizations and effectiveness; Counter-terrorism resource deployment; Ethics; Movement cooperation; Knowledge sharing; Ethnography; Improving the operational agility of counter-terrorism organizations; Colonial legacies and Islamophobia in Asia.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Two research desiderata topics stand out: “Prevention strategies” (8 mentions) and “Artificial intelligence and digital counter-terrorism measures and communications” (7 mentions).

Regarding the first, there is a sizeable, but largely superficial, literature on prevention.[14] While there is finally a major English Handbook on Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness (The Hague: ICCT, 2021; online freely available at <https://www.icct.nl>), there is, unfortunately, no such equivalent when it comes to preventing state terrorism.[15]

Regarding the second research desideratum, Artificial Intelligence: there is a danger that artificial intelligence for CT is designed and applied by researchers who have no or little knowledge of the field of (counter-) terrorism studies. As Gian Maria Campedelli, the author of a ground-breaking dissertation *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism* (Milan: Catholic University of the Holy Heart, 2019), expressed it so well in a communication to the jury of the Terrorism Research Initiative:

*We are living in an extraordinary historical moment—for better or for worse—and we, as terrorist researchers, are facing the risks and opportunities that new contaminations from other fields are bringing to our doorstep. Terrorism research has always been a contaminated and diverse field, with researchers from psychology, sociology, political science, law, and economics contributing together in the attempt to answer*

*the same crucial questions. I myself am a criminologist, and I have always admired this inherently lively heterogeneity. In front of us, however, we have what could become the most important—and disruptive—contamination of the field so far. The contamination with computational sciences. Artificial Intelligence—in the declination of machine and deep learning—is all around us. Its industrial applications populate our daily lives, and its impact has already started to influence the social sciences. In fact, AI has already been employed in conflict research and—less frequently—to study terrorism. Screening the (scarce) existing literature at the intersection of terrorism and AI, however, it is worth noticing how these contributions very often come from scholars belonging to natural, physical, and mathematical sciences. More importantly, many of these contributors (those who Schuurman, in a recent article, calls “one-timers”) use terrorism as a free zone where to experiment fancy and sophisticated methods without paying any attention to the societal implications and conceptual cornerstones of their works. This process represents a twofold challenge for terrorism research. First, the hype and (over)claims around AI may lead to copious funding for studying terrorism through intelligent systems, excluding terrorism experts from the debate. Second, this methodologically oriented detour might generate real-world deployable models based on wrong assumptions, weak premises, and biased interpretations of what terrorism actually is. Terrorist researchers have a responsibility that goes well beyond publishing papers and books, at this time. Ignoring the potential consequences of this revolution can have tremendously negative effects on science and, ultimately, people. This is why the challenges terrorism research is facing are, to me, not only scientific but also ethical.*

*“On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism” humbly tries to address these challenges. As naïve as it may seem, I have always worked on it intending to create something that, someday, could be useful to protect lives and peace.(...)As machine intelligence will help us all in the mission of understanding the causes and consequences of terrorism, this work testifies that methodology cannot bypass the need for grounded theory, reliable assumptions, solid interpretations. This work, in the end, calls for the renovated role of guardianship and innovation that terrorism researchers should assume, given the promises and the challenges of the field. First and foremost, to keep moving toward the heart of all those questions we cannot yet answer to.”[16]*

We could not have said it better than Dr. Campedelli.

Regarding [B (11)]: “If you had drafted this questionnaire to assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: which question would you have included (and what would be your answer to that question)?”, we received only 19 responses from the total of 47 respondents. For four “missing” questions there were more than one respondent (i.e., they proposed the same or a similar question).

<b>Responses related to</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Research impact	3	6.4%
Research tools, methodology	3	6.4%
Meaning of counter-terrorism studies and the differences with terrorism studies	3	6.4%
Research scope, trajectory	2	4.3%

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

While some respondents thought that the questionnaire was reasonably complete (“this questionnaire is complete”; “it is all there”), others offered additional questions, with or without their personal answer to the question posed. Here are the main ones:

**Question:** “How did Islamist front groups do such an amazing job of infiltrating “deradicalization” programs and why do governments make the same decisions over and over again in this field?”

**Answer:** “Governments have been infiltrated by Islamist front groups, yet refuse to take a hard look at with whom they are working.”

**Question:** “Can terrorism and counter-terrorism studies be separated effectually?”

*Answer:* “No.”

**Question:** “How to strike a perfect balance so we do not over- or under-react?”

**Question:** “Do you know any studies that investigate in a scientific manner the effectiveness of counter-terrorism?”

**Question:** “How should academic research on counter-terrorism be connected with praxis?”

**Question:** “Why is our current research so short-sighted, and why is terrorism analysis always presented as such a novel, urgent, unheard-of threat?”

**Question:** “Do we better understand the drivers and sources of identity-based extremism and terrorism (Islamist, White, Buddhist, and Hindu)?”

*Answer:* “No, we do not, much more work is needed.”

**Question:** “What is the impact of counter-terrorism legislation on human rights?”

**Question:** “Which organizations/centers have contributed the most to counter-terrorism studies in recent years?!”

*Answer:* “START” [University of Maryland, seat of the Global Terrorism Database].

**Question:** “In your view, what principles should dictate whether terrorism should be treated according to the principles of criminal law or by the rules of war?”

*Answer:* “In my view, the main criterion is the effectiveness of law-enforcement institutions (police, courts of law). When terrorists are based outside the reach of law-enforcement institutions they must be treated by the rules of war.”

**Question:** “What software tools do you consider helpful in conducting counter-terrorism assessments?”

**Question:** “Has technology outstripped the need for HUMINT (human intelligence) in counter-terrorism studies?”

*Answer:* “The power of intuition. Gut instinct, loyalty, empathy, religious faith, synthesis, memory recall, cultural nuances, language inference, and human emotions cannot be disaggregated and codified accurately into even the most sophisticated counter-terrorism software. Put simply, human connection is invaluable.”

The three authors of this Research Note hope that someone in the research community picks up these questions and includes them in a new survey.

Our last question was not really a question but an invitation to make a suggestion [B(12)]: “If there is anything additional you would like to share about the current situation in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, please do so below.”

Only 7 of the 47 respondents volunteered a suggestion and only two respondents came up with one and the same suggestion, referring to the relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism studies (one respondent wrote: “I don’t think one can engage in counter-terrorism studies without simultaneously engaging in terrorism studies,” while the other wrote: “Since I regard terrorism and counter-terrorism as inextricably linked, i.e., you cannot effectively counter terrorism until you properly understand it...”). Unique single answers referred, inter alia, to tensions between “critical”, “neutral”, and “applied” counter-terrorism studies and to ideological ecosystems (“There should be more study of the ideological ecosystems that promote White supremacist worldviews within Western government, law enforcement and militaries; ditto for Islamist, Buddhist, and

Hindu extremist cases”).

### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Unlike many other fields of study, the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies lacks a central national, regional, or global depository where bona fide researchers can access relevant open and grey literature without incurring high costs. One of our respondents therefore suggested that “The Counter Terrorism Research community should foster Open Science standards (e.g., open-access publishing, making their research data accessible to other researchers, wherever possible, preregister studies). This respondent therefore suggested that counter-terrorism research should have a field-specific literature database (as is common in other disciplines such as *PubMed* for Medicine and *PsycINFO* for psychology).

### **Conclusion**

The most striking result of this survey is the low degree of consensus among the respondents (which is partly linked to the low response rate). In only two of the 12 questions (questions six and nine), 10 of the 47 respondents could agree on one and the same answer. On the whole, counter-terrorism studies appear to be, as one respondent put it, “quite behind terrorism studies conceptually.” While the distance between academic research and government in-house research has diminished in recent years, the question “How to better improve cooperation between researchers, governments, tech companies, and the public at large” (as one respondent put it), is still very much a burning issue. It has been expressed in a question another respondent asked: “To what extent do you believe that the work of researchers/academics in the field of CT studies is actually incorporated into CT policy/practice?” It is the old issue of “speaking truth to power”. However, there are few uncontroversial truths in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies, although some of the “Lessons Learned” referred to above come, in the view of the authors of this Research Note, close to it.

While some governments and international organizations (like the European Commission) have been funding research quite generously, many well-funded multi-million research programs have produced few findings that have been identified by our respondents as ground-breaking. On the other hand, some research done on a shoestring budget (often in the form of doctoral dissertation research) has come up with new insights that have advanced the field of CT studies. In the view of the three authors of this Research Note, the field of CT studies is actually in better shape than one might conclude from the answers of many of the respondents of this questionnaire. We believe that most of those who care to study the books and articles listed in the bibliography below would agree.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank all respondents who answered our questions. Some preferred to remain anonymous; the others we can name here:

Max Abrahms, Gary A. Ackerman, Atal Ahmadzai, Dina Al Raffie, Monica G. Bartoloszewicz, Neil G. Bowie, Kristy Champion, Beatrice de Graaf, James Cook Dingley, Nils Duits, Muhammad Feyyaz, Boaz Ganor, William W. Hansen, Asad Ullah Khan, Peter Knoope, Rüdiger Lohlker, Marco Lombardi, James M. Lutz, Leena Malkki, Miroslav Mareš, Devorah Margolin, Assaf Moghadam, Rachel Monaghan, Brian Nussbaum, Brian Phillips, Thomas Quiggin, Kumar Ramakrishna, Thomas Renard, Marie Robin, Jeffrey Ian Ross, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, Joshua Sinai, Anne Speckhard, Nicolas Stockhammer, Surekha Talari, Judith Tinnes, Jarosław Tomasiewicz, Darko Trifunovic, Victor Asal, Clive Walker, Stevie Weinberg, and Craig Whiteside.

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## Appendix:

### *A Brief Chronology of Definitions/Descriptions of Counter-Terrorism*

#### US Department of Defense (2003):

**Antiterrorism:** Defensive measures taken to reduce vulnerability to terrorist acts.

**Counterterrorism:** Offensive measures taken to prevent (preempt), deter (disrupt), and respond to terrorism.

**Combating terrorism (CbT):** Combating terrorism within the DOD encompasses all actions [including antiterrorism, counterterrorism, and terrorism consequence management] and intelligence support taken to oppose terrorism throughout the entire threat spectrum, including terrorist use of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear materials, or high-yield explosive (CBRNE) devices.[17]

**UK Home Office (2006):** “Since early 2003, the United Kingdom has had a long-term strategy for countering international terrorism (known within Government as CONTEST). Its aim is to reduce the risk from international terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence. The strategy is divided into four principal strands: PREVENT, PURSUE, PROTECT, and PREPARE. (...) The PREVENT strand is concerned with tackling the radicalisation of individuals. (...) The PURSUE strand is concerned with reducing the terrorist threat to the UK and to UK interests overseas by disrupting terrorists and their operations. (...) The PROTECT strand is concerned with reducing the vulnerability of the UK and UK interests overseas. (...) The PREPARE strand is concerned with ensuring that the UK is as ready as it can be for the consequences of a terrorist attack.”[18]

**United Nations, General Assembly (2006):** Resolution A/RES/60/288 on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

UN Counter-Terrorism measures are divided into four categories:

- i. Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism:* including prolonged unresolved conflicts, lack of rule of law and violations of human rights, ethnic, national, and religious discrimination, political exclusion, and socioeconomic marginalization.
- ii. Measures to prevent and combat terrorism:* in particular by denying terrorists access to the means to carry out their attacks, to their targets, and to the desired impact of their attacks.
- iii. Measures to build States’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the UN system in this regard:* recognizing that capacity-building in all States is a core element of the global counter-terrorism effort, and enhancing coordination and coherence within the UN system in promoting international cooperation in countering terrorism.
- iv. Measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism:* to reaffirm that the promotion and protection of human rights for all and the rule of law is essential to all components of the Strategy, and recognizing that effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually

reinforcing.”[19]

**Richard J. Chasdi (2010):** “In its most basic form, the term ‘counterterrorism’ is used by many, but certainly not all scholars, to describe efforts to constrain or suppress terrorist assault practiced in most cases by non-state actors. Many specialists rely on general, open-ended definitions of counterterror that really do not distinguish between counterterror practices, war-making in general, and the all too frequent overlap between the spheres of counterterror practices, state terrorism, oppression, and ‘total war’. Clearly, some definitions of counterterrorism harp on obvious suppression or constraint elements, seemingly oblivious to the nuances and intricacies involved in defining what amounts to efforts against terrorism in the broader sense and thinking about the relationships and thresholds of that phenomenon with respect to other conflict modes.”[20]

**Alex P. Schmid (2011):** [Counter-Terrorism]: “A proactive effort to prevent, deter and combat politically motivated violence directed at civilian and non-combatant targets by the use of a broad spectrum of response measures – law enforcement, political, psychological, social, economic and (para-)military.”[21]

**Andrew Silke (2011):** “The policies, strategies and tactics that states use to combat terrorism and deal with its consequences are referred to as counter-terrorism.(...) Counter-terrorism can take a variety of forms. Some of the most common approaches are listed below and it is normal for a state to use a combination of different approaches rather than to rely on just one exclusively:

- Introduction of special counter-terrorism legislation.
- Creation of specialist counter-terrorism units in state services (incl. police and military).
- Use of repression.
- Use of military intervention and reprisals.
- Introduce Special Incarceration and Detention policies.
- Media management.
- Negotiated Settlement.”[22]

**Silvia D’Amato (2019):** “Counterterrorism has in fact been defined in a variety of ways. Usually, its definition is empirically grounded, and so literature has largely been indifferent with respect to the nuances between anti- and counterterrorism. It might nonetheless be suggested that while anti-terrorism usually refers to the policies and measures implemented to prevent terrorist attacks from taking place, the notion of counterterrorism implies a responsive interaction or the idea of an imperative to react to implemented forms of terrorism. To simplify, this study will employ “counterterrorism” to refer to the general decisions that states make across numerous policy areas to fight terrorism. Hence, counterterrorism is understood in a broader sense as a type of security policy addressing terrorism and encompassing a range of actions, both domestic and international.”[23]

**Thomas Renard (2021):** “...a state strategy that includes coercive and noncoercive instruments across a large range of policy areas, developed and implemented with the specific intention to prevent and respond to terrorism.”[24]

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## Notes

- [1] Lewis, Olivier, "Conceptualizing State Counterterrorism," in: Romaniuk, Scott N., Francis Grice, Daniela Irrera, Stewart Webb (Eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 5.
- [2] Byman, Daniel (2019): "Counterterrorism Strategies," in: Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis N. Kalyvas (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 623.
- [3] Crelinsten, Ronald D. (2009). *Counterterrorism*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Ronald D. Crelinsten, R. "Conceptualising Counterterrorism"; in Andrew Silke. *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*. London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 481–487; Thomas Renard. *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001*. Ghent University, 2021, pp. 23–24.- For a detailed listing of 140 CT measures, see: Appendix: "A Toolbox of Counterterrorism Measures"; in: Alex P. Schmid, "Towards Joint Political Strategies for De-legitimising the Use of Terrorism"; in: Alex P. Schmid (Ed.). *Countering Terrorism through International Cooperation*. Milan: ISPAC, 2001; pp. 266–273. This Toolbox groups responses to terrorism into eight categories: 1. Politics and Governance [15 measures], 2. Economic and Social [19 measures], 3. Psychological – Communicational – Educational [19 measures], 4. Military [20 measures], 5. Judicial and Legal [18 measures], 6. Police and Prison System [22 measures], 7. Intelligence and Secret Service [12 measures], and 8. Other [20 measures].
- [4] Nacos, Brigitte L. *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017 (5<sup>th</sup> edition), p. 288; Ekaterina Stepanova (2019) "Russia's Response to Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century"; in: Michael J. Boyle (Ed.) *Non-Western Responses to Terrorism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019, (note 13), pp. 51–52.
- [5] Crelinsten, Ronald D. *Terrorism, Democracy, and Human Security. A Communication Model*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.
- [6] Cf. Schmid, Alex P. "The Response Problem as a Definition Problem"; in: Alex P. Schmid & Ronald D. Crelinsten (Eds.), *Western Responses to Terrorism*. London: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 7–13. In that chapter, the author argued in favor of a narrow definition, suggesting that "...Western policy-makers would do well to choose a restricted legal definition of terrorism as 'peacetime equivalent of war crimes'. Such a definition might exclude some forms of violence and coercion (such as attacks on the military, hijackings for escape and destruction of property) currently labelled 'terrorism' by some governments. However, a narrow and precise definition of terrorism is likely to find broader support than one that includes various forms of violent dissent and protest short of terrorist atrocities." – Ibid., p. 12.
- [7] Walter Laqueur observed in 1987: "The virtual impossibility of outlining a counter-terrorism policy of universal validity was pointed out by the US Vice-President Task Force on combating terrorism after lengthy deliberations in 1985: 'Because acts of terrorism vary so much in time and location, jurisdiction and motivation, consistent response is virtually impossible.'" - Walter Laqueur. *The Age of Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1987, p. 312. Since then some progress has been made, especially after the mandatory UN Security Council Resolution 1373 was passed on 28 September 2001.
- [8] Schmid, Alex P., James J. F. Forest, and Timothy Lowe. "Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 3, June 2021, pp. 142–152.
- [9] Cf. the four surveys of databases and data sets by Neil Bowie, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol XV, Issue 2 (April 2021) and earlier issues.
- [10] For information on BAAD, see URL: <https://start.umd.edu>.
- [11] For listings of 160 databases/data sets on terrorism, see Neil Bowie in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 2 (April 2021) and earlier issues.

- [12] For a discussion, see: Schmid, Alex P. and Rashmi Singh. 2009. "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism – U.S. Government Metrics and the Global War on Terror"; in: Alex P. Schmid and Garry F. Hindle (Eds.) *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. London: RUSI Books, 33–61. URL: <https://rusi.org/rusi-news/after-war-terror>
- [13] By mid-2021 two of the planned four volumes authored by Dennis A. Pluchinsky were published.
- [14] Cf. General Bibliography on Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness by Ishaansh Singh in Alex P. Schmid (Ed.). *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*. The Hague: ICCT, 2021, pp. 1188–1288. Available at <https://www.icct.nl>.
- [15] The only non-English near equivalent is the German-language *Handbuch Extremismusprävention*. Gesamtgesellschaftlich, Phänomenübergreifend [Handbook Extremism Prevention, covering all of society, going beyond the phenomenon itself], edited by Brahim Ben Slama and Uwe Kemmesies and published by the German Federal Crime Office (Wiesbaden: Bundeskriminalamt, 2020), 755 pp. Online available at <<https://www.handbuch-extremismuspraevention.de>>.
- [16] Letter of G. M. Campedelli to Jury of the TRI Thesis Award, 31 March 2020; The author of this thesis was one of three finalists in the competition for the Best Thesis in the Field of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies, 2019–2020. His doctoral thesis can be inspected at <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339254207\\_On\\_Meta-Networks\\_Deep\\_Learning\\_Time\\_and\\_Jihadism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339254207_On_Meta-Networks_Deep_Learning_Time_and_Jihadism)>.
- [17] Cit. Kraft, Michael B. and Edward Marks. *U.S. Government Counterterrorism. A Guide to Who Does What*. Boca Raton: CRC Press 2012, p. 29.
- [18] UK Government, Home Office (2006): *Countering International Terrorism. The United Kingdom's Response*. [Cm 6888, London, July 2006]. [CONTEST stands for: COuNter-TERRORism STRategy].
- [19] United Nations (2006): *Global Counter-terrorism Strategy and Plan of Action*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. (A/RES/60/28, 60th Session, Agenda items 46 and 120). New York: UN.
- [20] Chasdi, Richard J. (2010): *Counterterror Offensives for the Ghost War World. The Rudiments of Counterterrorism Policy*. Lanham: Lexington Books, p. 19.
- [21] Alex P. Schmid (Ed.) (2011): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London and New York, Routledge, p. 620.
- [22] Andrew Silke (2011): "The Psychology of Counter-terrorism: Critical Issues and Challenges"; in: Andrew Silke (Ed.). *The Psychology of Counter-Terrorism*. London: Routledge, 2011, p. 3.
- [23] Silvia D'Amato, *Cultures of Counterterrorism: French and Italian Responses*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 14–15.
- [24] Thomas Renard (2021): *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Ghent University dissertation*, p. 24. *Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001*. Ghent University, 2021, p. 24.
- [25] With many thanks to Dr. Judith Tinnes for numerous suggestions.