Announcements

Finalists and Winners of the TRI Thesis Award Competition for Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, 2019 & 2020

The mission of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) is to "Enhance Security through Collaborative Research". To achieve this, TRI has organized national networks of Ph. D. thesis writers, and issued, since 2014, an annual, and later bi-annual, award for the 'Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism' by members of these networks as well as others who have recently completed their doctorate at an academic institution.

A jury of four scholars – Prof. Clark McCauley, Prof. James J.F. Forest, Prof. Edwin Bakker and Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid (Chairman) - assess and compare the submissions TRI receives. They do so on the basis of six criteria (including originality, in-depth research and novelty of findings) and select among these three finalists and a winner.

For the doctoral theses that were submitted and/or defended in 2019 and 2020, the jury identified, after several rounds of deliberations, the following authors and theses as finalists:

> Dr. Michael Shkolnik: *Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies*. Ottawa, Canada: Carleton University, December 2019.

> Dr. 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, Belgium: Ghent University, November 2020.

> Dr. Gian Maria Campedelli. *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism.* Milan, Italy: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, November 2019.

For the first time, the jury selected two equally excellent theses as winners – one dealing with insurgency-related terrorism and the other dealing with counter-terrorism. The third thesis among the three finalists, stood out because of its author's cutting edge explorations of artificial intelligence for terrorism research.

All three finalists received in early August 2021 a Certificate of Achievement, signed by the four members of the jury. In addition, the winners - Michael Shkolnik and Thomas Renard - will each receive half of the prize money of US $ 1,000.-. The two winners have also been invited to summarize (aspects of) their doctoral theses for the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

Here are a few words of praise about the dissertations of the finalists and winners, based on the assessment of members of the jury.

Michael Shkolnis's thesis on *Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies* impressed the jury by the way he used a novel quantitative regression methodology for the analysis of 246 prominent militant groups active between 1970 and 2007, of which 77 groups waged sustained insurgencies. He supplemented the quantitative analysis by a number of qualitative case studies, using process tracing as his second methodology. He rightfully stressed the need to recognize the nuanced and dynamic contexts in which groups make decisions - something that strictly quantitative terrorism researchers often overlook. The jury found this winning thesis to be sophisticated and carefully reasoned. The author's finding that consolidation or suppression of rivals is, in many situations, the best predictor of an extended insurgency, is both persuasive and policy-relevant.

Dr. Michael Shkolnik is a Policy Analyst with the Canadian government as well as a Fellow and Sessional Lecturer at Ottawa's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA – Carlton University). His Ph.D. thesis can be consulted at URL: https://curve.carleton.ca/a1dc7fa6-b609-40a8-a8de-59b6905f8740

Thomas Renard's thesis on *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,* demonstrates how national counter-terrorism policies are not only driven by events and interests but also by institutions and ideas. Given the under-theorized field of counter-terrorism, Renard's attempt to bring in selected elements from public policy theories to explain the evolution of national CT policies in a European context was judged by members of the jury as being very original and its author therefore became co-winner of the TRI Thesis Award. The jury was impressed by the degree of access the author managed to gain to Belgian and European CT practitioners and policy-makers and the feedback he received from many of them about his emerging findings. While assessing the effectiveness (and other outcomes) of counterterrorism remains a challenging field of study, the author made a laudable effort to push the frontiers here as well.

Dr. Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute and Adjunct Professor at the Brussels School of Governance. He is also a Research Associate of the UNESCO-PREV Chair. His doctoral thesis can be consulted via URL: http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8701714 .

Gian Maria Campedelli's thesis *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism* is method-wise the most ambitious of the three finalist doctoral theses. The author tried to bring together network science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to uncover hidden patterns behind large amounts of data in an effort to design possible applications that can be useful for the prediction of terrorist targeting, weapon use and the combination thereof. The author demonstrates in sophisticated statistical analyses the potential of applying learning algorithms and graph theory to temporal chains of terrorist events. Noting that "The pervasiveness of artificial intelligence has contaminated a huge number of scientific fields", the author also offers a number of caveats why AI alone, without being grounded in sound social science, is likely to do more harm than good.

Dr. Campedelli is a criminologist by training. He was a visiting research scholar at Carnegie Mellon University (Institute for Software Research - Center for Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems), where his doctoral thesis was supervised by Prof. Kathleen M. Carley. Currently he is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow for computational criminology at the School of Sociology and Social Research - University of Trento (Italy).

The full text of the thesis by Dr. Campedelli can be inspected at URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publications/339254207_On_Meta-Networks_Deep_Learning_Time_and_Jihadism.

The chairman and the jury members of the TRI Thesis Award congratulate these three scholars for their outstanding dissertations.