# Research Desiderata: 150 Un- and Under-Researched Topics and Themes in the Field of (Counter-) Terrorism Studies – a New List

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## Introduction

Seven years ago, the March 2011 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* published a list of 50 Un- and Under-Researched Topics in the Field of (Counter-)Terrorism Studies [1]. That list was primarily meant for students in search of a new topic for their Master or doctoral theses, and has contributed to a number of publications.

Today, we feel there is a need for a new list, based on considerations such as:

i. Much of the research in the field is concentrated on a very limited number of topics;

ii. In particular, much of the attention in the field is concentrated on individual terrorist groups and incidents and not enough on the movements and campaigns of which these are a part;

iii. In the area of counter-terrorism research, significant attention is given to preventing 'downstream' individual radicalisation and not enough to preventing 'upstream' structural extremism;

iv. There is a continuing dearth of evaluation and replication studies;

v. The links between terrorism studies and some other fields of violence studies (e.g. genocide) are weak, despite the fact that they share certain common characteristics.

Based on such reflections, the editors asked members of the Editorial Board and Advisory Board of Perspectives on Terrorism - and a few other colleagues from the scholarly, policy and practitioner communities - for suggestions that would be incorporated into a new list of the most un- and under-researched topics in the study of terrorism and counter-terrorism. We received many responses, suggesting a great variety of topics and themes, and also added our own research desiderata. We have grouped topics and themes into the following 14 categories:

1. Terrorist Organisations and Terrorist Group Members (25 topics)

2. Radicalisation & De-radicalisation (7)

3. Causes of Terrorism (10)

4. Religion and Terrorism (10)

5. Internet/(Social) Media and Terrorism (15)

6. Terrorism and the Public/Public Opinion (6)

7. War and Terrorism (6)

8. State and Regime-Linked Terrorism (2)

9. Country and Regional Studies (6)

10. Prevention of, and Countering (Violent) Extremism and Terrorism- PVE/CVE (10)

11. Counter-Terrorism by Governments and International Organisations (37)

12. Victim Issues (7)

13. Conceptual Issues (4)

As we edited the suggestions we had received from our colleagues, we combined and rephrased some of them. For this reason, we decided not to link specific topics and themes to individual respondents whose contributions we acknowledge below.

We hope that this new list will stimulate new research in academia and beyond. We also invite readers to inform us where they see other gaps in our present knowledge of terrorism and counter-terrorism. We hope as well that researchers will share with us studies inspired by the list of research desiderata presented below.

## *Acknowledgements*

## *Research Desiderata*

**Terrorist Organisations and Terrorist Group Members (25)**

1.    Purpose and effect of terrorist hoax attack claims and warnings.

2.    Creating a dataset on prevented and foiled terrorist attacks.

3.    Terrorist groups' access to conventional weapons (there is more research on WMDs, although most terrorist attackers are using conventional arms).

4.    Accepting responsibility for acts of terrorism: accountability of terrorist groups for the consequences of their acts of violence.

5.    Before they turned terrorist: the antecedents of terrorist groups.

6.    The justification and morality of terrorist violence, according to the terrorists' own writings and speeches.

7.    Why do some persons within a terrorist group – if they have a choice – opt for 'non-violent' support roles rather than becoming 'front line' fighters?

8.    "Non-violent" extremism as a psychological barrier to terrorist violence? Pro- and contra arguments explored.

9.    The non-terrorist activities of terrorist movements and perpetrators.

10.    Vigilante and death squad terrorism.

11.    The division of labour between 'back stage' terrorists and 'front stage' political parties: case studies.

12.    NGOs, charities and refugee organisations as terrorist front organisations: case studies.

13.    Sabotaging peace talks through acts of terrorism: successful and unsuccessful attempts.

14.    Unintended blowback effects of terrorist tactics/strategies or behavior (causing loss of sympathisers, creating "bad PR" even among sympathizing audiences), and CT-measures derived from insights into these.

15. Implications for terrorist attacks of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and advances in CBRN.

16. Terrorist self-images and their victim images.

17. Psychological dynamics and practical issues of leaving violent extremism and terrorism.

18. Successful transformations of terrorist organisations into political parties, and other non-violent organisations.

19. Hostage takings and executions conducted by terrorist groups: empirical research on perpetrators.

20. Typology and inventory of terrorist demands.

21. Terrorist blackmail and coercion: comparative case studies of demand fulfillment and demand denial.

22. Terrorism and the impact of innovation.

23. Right-wing/domestic terrorism: structural, legal perceptions, differences to other forms of terrorism, group dynamics, communication strategies, links to other forms of crime etc.

24. Non-jihadist terrorism, other than right-wing terrorism. This could include, for example, anti-abortion, animal rights, environmentalist, or apocalyptic terrorism.

25. Agro-terrorism: Fact or Fiction?

## Radicalisation & De-radicalisation (7)

1. Ecologies of radicalisation.

2. Non-radicalisation: Why do some persons and groups exposed to similar push/pull factors and the same structural and conflict dynamics as terrorists chose not to get involved in indiscriminate violence against civilians?

3. Conversion and radicalisation in various contexts (not just prisons).

4. Cross-national comparative and longitudinal studies of group (rather than individual) de-radicalisation processes.

5. Empirical research on the efficacy of de-radicalisation programs.

6. The issue of de-radicalising/taking care of children who are still residing in Syria and the question who is responsible for them (parents, family, governments of countries of origin of foreign fighters?)

7. Establishment of smart social media algorithms to address vulnerable people exposed to terrorist propaganda. This could analyse interactions rather than mere connections.

## Causes of Terrorism (10)

1. Refugee camps as breeding grounds for terrorists: comparative case studies.

2. Causes of terrorism as reflected in (former) terrorists' own writings.

3. Testing criminological models against terrorism data.

4. Discovering causal mechanisms in the understanding of terrorism and radicalisation.

5. The roles of (sub-)culture in the genesis of terrorism.

6.      Developing validated risk factors for involvement in terrorist organisations.

7.      A risk analysis of the likelihood of terrorist attacks on, and around, specific dates (e.g. national holi days, anniversaries).

8.      The role of revenge in triggering acts of terrorism.

9.      Un- and under-employment as factors for individuals opting to join a terrorist organisation.

10.     'Cool' and 'chic' factors (like in a fashion movement) creating terrorists (ISIS somehow managed to become 'fashionable' among some Muslim youth sectors. How was this possible and what were its effects?).


## Religion and Terrorism (10)

1.      Are there inherently violent "potentials" within fundamentalist religions?

2.      Religious beliefs as both a driver of, and barrier against, violence; evidence from different religions.

3.      Promoting "contextualised" religious identities as a 'firewall' against violent religious extremism; ex amples from different religions.

4.      Research on Salafism and Salafi Jihadism and their associated with Wahhabism (Terrorist recruiters often target Wahhabi youth for faster results. This is also in line with the AQ recruitment   manual).

5.      The role and place of converts in right-wing Christian and in Islamist terrorist groups.

6.      Jihadis in civil war settings and how that has created fractures within the movement historically (How can we incorporate civil war literature with jihadi studies - case studies on Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal, Iraq around the time of the surge/sahwa, and Syria in recent years).

7.      The evolution in the relationship between mainstream Islamist groups and jihadi groups since the 1980s and how it's been complicated, based on complicity through the 1990s, pushing away in the 2000s, then naive enabling post-Arab uprisings, and what that means now as there has been a second push back, especially as AQ and IS have different views on these groups and whether they are consid ered infidels or wayward Muslims that need to be brought back into the fold through outreach/educa tion.

8.      How states have helped incubate or enable the growth of jihadism in major foreign fighter arenas (e.g. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia with Afghanistan, Syria with Iraq, Turkey with Syria) - and why that has backfired every time.

9.      'Saffron terrorism': killings by Hindutva militants allegedly linked to India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (This might also be researched as state terrorism owing to alleged links between Hindutva terror outfits and India's governing party).

10.     Rohingya Muslims and Buddhism. What is happening and why are some Buddhist monks supporting the military?


## Internet/(Social) Media and Terrorism (15)

1.      The role of 'old' and 'new' social media in strengthening terrorism and also in countering terrorism.

2.      A comparison of social media campaigns by terrorist groups and non-violent extremist movements.

3.      Terrorists' and violent extremists' use of the Dark and Deep Web.

4.  Role of the internet in stimulating and facilitating recruitment into terrorist networks.

5.  Terrorists' and violent extremists' use of new virtual platforms (e.g., Reddit, Voat, 4chan, 8chan, etc.).

6.  The impact of offline events on the online discourse of terrorists and violent extremists (and vice versa).

7.  The role of new social media technology in the facilitation of violent extremism.

8.  Radical behaviours online that merge into violent extremist behaviour off-line.

9.  The effects of media coverage of terrorist plots and acts on fear, anger and support for components of counterterrorism policies among various sectors of society.

10.  While there has been much research on jihadi magazines since around 2010, exploring the older magazines from the 80s and 90s would add crucial historical information. This would also be useful in terms of seeing how things have changed or remained the same within the jihadist movement over the past 30 years.

11.  Internet-enabled terrorism: analysing causes, its many modalities and possible mitigating strategies.

12.  Media departments of terrorist organisations: comparative case studies (e.g. the Global Islamic Media). What is the role of the media in rewarding terrorists and how should 'news values' be adapted so as not to do provide terrorists with free access to large publics.

13.  Learning from the media: copycat crime - televised terrorist acts repeated by others than the original perpetrators: a review of contagion effects.

14.  Cyber-Terrorism: myths and realities.

15.  Discerning intent for action, based on online behaviours and posting styles.


### Terrorism and the Public / Public Opinion (6)

1.  Impact of terrorism on public behaviour at election times: comparative case studies.

2.  Does public opinion influence terrorists? If so, how?

3.  The impact of terrorism on various segments of the population.

4.  Determinants of popular support for terrorist organisations.

5.  Educating the public about terrorism: national experiences.

6.  Psychological and economic consequences of terrorism for various actors other than direct victims.


### War and Terrorism (6)

1.  War crimes and acts of terrorism: similarities and dissimilarities.

2.  The use and misuse of military force in countering terrorism: lessons learned.

3.  Justifications of political violence by terrorist groups, resistance movements and guerrilla organisations in conflict situations.

4.  War and terrorism: their interplay in the conflict in Yemen (which receives significantly lower attention than the conflicts in Syria or Iraq)

5.  Damaged war veterans: the propensity of traumatised veterans to engage in terrorist and other vio lence after returning to civilian life.

6.  The blurring of distinctions between conventional war, irregular warfare and terrorism, especially in relation to civilian casualties, population displacement and urban destruction.

## State & Regime-linked Terrorism (2)

1.  State terrorism in general, but also state terrorism against diaspora communities and opposition groups abroad.

2.  False flag operations by government agencies and proxies at home and abroad.

## Country- and Regional Studies (6)

1.  Why are European right-wing extremist groups apparently so much less inclined to use terrorist vio lence than their jihadist counterparts?

2.  Far-right anti-Muslim violence in Europe and North America.

3.  There is a comparative lack of reliable, field-based work on Pakistan, compared with the huge impor tance of terrorism and counter-terrorism in, and relating to, that country.

4.  Violence linked to xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the US and Europe.

5.  Histories of jihadism in Morocco, post-civil war Algeria, and Libya.

6.  Research on al-Qaeda governance projects in Yemen, Somalia, Mali, and Syria.

## Prevention of, and Countering (Violent) Extremism and Terrorism- PVE/CVE (10)

1.  Multi-sectorial approaches to building resilience against radicalization to violent extremism.

2.  The effectiveness of bulk messaging compared to direct face-to-face communications at the mi cro-level in CVE and/or PVE.

3.  Evaluation of CVE programs, and CT initiatives more generally.

4.  The effectiveness of securitization in CVE: securitization vs resilience.

5.  Creating CVE databases to parallel START's Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

6.  CVE efforts that focus on violence rather than extremist (fundamentalists/Salafist/jihadist/Islamist) ideas.

7.  The use of PR techniques by CVE actors- their intended and actual effects.

8.  Evaluations and quality standards for CVE and de-radicalisation programs.

9.  Perception of terminology (e.g. the "CVE" or "de-radicalisation" label) by a target population and its effects on the program.

10.  Legal and ethical aspects of CVE/ de-radicalisation work in Western and non-Western contexts.

## *Counter-Terrorism by Governments and International Organisations (37)*

1.    Learning from the past? The role of historical analogies in counter-terrorism (e.g. "Lessons Learned" from the Malayan Emergency, 1948-60) for the current global struggle against violent extremism.

2.    Comparisons of successful governments campaigns to defeat terrorism.

3.    The rise and fall (and rise again?) of terrorist profiling.

4.    Training manuals on counter-terrorism: an evaluation of public and private sector products.

5.    Bomb threat assessments; operating procedures compared.

6.    Unclaimed and multi-claim attacks: problems of attribution and prosecution.

7.    The impact of counter-terrorism- and prevention-programs (such as PREVENT in the UK) on fear, anger and trust in government among various sectors of society.

8.    Silencing and punishing the press: journalists as terrorist and counter-terrorist targets.

9.    John Boyd's ODOA (Observe-Decide-Orientate-Act) loop: A potent strategic approach for organising the war against violent extremist groups of global reach?

10.    Countering terrorism within the UN System: the mushrooming of programs; who does what, how with which effect?

11.    Infrastructure of counter-terrorism: The working of national fusion centers [e.g. CITCO (Spain), UCLAT (France), JTAC (UK), NCTV (Netherlands), OCAD (Belgium), NCTC (USA), and ITAC (Canada)] compared.

12.    Counter-productive counter-terrorism: strategies of counter-terrorism that failed.

13.    'Hard' vs. 'soft' power approaches to countering terrorism: measuring their effectiveness.

14.    Research on better indicators for recognising suicide bombers (e.g. by measuring stress levels of voice and of facial expressions).

15.    Effectiveness in counter-terrorism: existing and emerging methodologies of measurement.

16.    Law enforcement vs. military responses to terrorism- comparing success rates.

17.    The effectiveness of blocking terrorist fundraising.

18.    Secret negotiations with terrorist groups: case studies.

19.    Failures of VIP protection against terrorist attacks; determinants of successful assassinations.

20.    Non-Western CT-measures/-approaches.

21.    Terrorist defectors and their role in countering terrorism.

22.    Emergency management (including crisis communication, in social media and beyond).

23.    Terrorism and humour (e.g. for CT-purposes or resilience-building).

24.    Evaluations of counter-terrorism policies, including conciliatory policies.

25.    Communicating with terrorists at the individual level (Often, due to isolation and radicalization, terrorists shoot down their communication channels to the outside world; therefore, they donot re ceive most messages targeting them).

26.    While de-radicalisation might be important, interruption of the terrorist recruitment should have

priority over de-radicalisation programs.

27.   New strategies focusing on the interruption of the terrorist recruitment at the very early stages.

28.   Narrowing the theory-practice gap: Optimal strategies for ensuring data-driven research effectively impacts CT/CVE practitioners" perceptions.

29.   CT efforts by domestic activist groups or individuals (e.g. citizen journalists such as those from 'Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently'), or refugees who cooperate with intelligence/police to identify members of terrorist groups.

30.   Custodial and community rehabilitation programs, including family rehabilitation, compared.

31.   Legal research on material support convictions leading to extreme sentences for non-violent suspects in the U.S.

32.   Integrating CVE with military counter-insurgency: a good idea?

33.   Testing and validating risk of radicalisation assessment tools.

34.   Research on effects/effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts.

35.   Measuring the efficiency of counter-terrorism operations.

36.   The impact of CT policies on the quality of liberal democracies.

37.   Counter-messaging and counter-narratives- does it work and how? Best practices.

## Victim Issues (7)

1.   The psychology of fear in victims of violent crime and victims of terrorism.

2.   Coping with anxiety, fear and terror: theories of emotional control.

3.   Varieties of (former) victim responses to (new) terrorist threats.

4.   The impact of terrorist death threats on the lives of designated targets.

5.   Hostage takings and executions conducted by terrorist groups (also with a focus on victims instead of perpetrators).

6.   The victim-terrorist nexus: under what circumstances do (ex-)victims turn to terrorism?

7.   Improving coping and healing strategies for victims of terrorism: promising practices. (Post-traumatic stress disorders: short-, medium- and long-term effects on victims, onlookers and third parties and how best to deal with these).

## Conceptual Issues (4)

1.   What distinguishes 'terror' from other types of fear (anxiety, panic, horror, etc.)?

2.   Comparisons between terrorism and other forms of violence (e.g. ethnic cleansing, hate crimes)

3.   Mass shootings in U.S. schools: how do these differ from terrorism?

4.   The distinction between 'normal' murders and terrorist killings, and, more in particular, the distinction between lone actors and murderers- the 'framing' of such attacks.

### *The Areas of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies (5)*

1.    Terrorism research and ethics: moral issues for researchers investigating terrorism and counter-terrorism.

2.    Bibliometrical work on terrorism research (i); Multi-discplinary analysis: What share of research in the total corpus of terrorism research is produced by specific academic disciplines such as psychology, criminology, political science etc.?; research should include open access journals/ data sets/ databases.

3.    Bibliometrical work on terrorism research (ii); topic modeling: which terrorism research topics are under-researched / saturated? (a Big Data approach could be very helpful here (and also for the previous topic).

4.    Public science practices in terrorism research (e.g. identifying/analysing the landscape of/ developments in open-access publishing of articles, data sets, data bases) and how to foster them.

5.    Attracting and mentoring a new generation of terrorism/CT scholars while academe is under external pressures".

*About the Compilers:* Alex P. Schmid and James J. Forest are the editors of '*Perspectives on Terrorism*'.

### *Note*

[1] Alex P. Schmid. 50 Un- and Under-researched Topics in the Field of (Counter-) Terrorism Studies

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