Moving Terrorism Research Forward:

The Crucial Role of Primary Sources

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ICCT Background Note

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Research can only be as good as the data on which it is based. Unfortunately for scholars in the field of (counter-)terrorism studies, getting access to reliable primary sources, such as government archives and interviews with (former) terrorists, has been a long-standing challenge. The good news is that the last couple of years have seen some important improvements in this regard that have opened-up exciting new avenues for research on terrorism. This background note discusses the causes and consequences of the scarcity of primary source-based research for academics and policy makers. It also highlights several examples of an encouraging trend towards the greater use of such data in the study of terrorism. Finally, it provides a critical analysis of several forms or primary data commonly used by terrorism researchers.

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1. Introduction

This background note focuses on the causes and consequences of the scarcity of primary source-based research on (counter-)terrorism and reviews a trend towards the greater use of such data.[1] It discusses the implications of the overreliance on secondary sources of data in the field of terrorism studies, highlights some interesting recent developments which show how this problem is being addressed and reflects upon the causes of this issue. Why have relatively few authors used such data? What obstacles can be identified and how might they be overcome?

This background note consists of three sections. The first outlines the problem. How has the scarcity of primary sources affected the development of terrorism studies as an academic field of inquiry? The second discusses some of the causes of this problem; what makes it so difficult to obtain primary sources? It concludes with a critical discussion of some of the advantages and disadvantages involved in using such sources. The third and final part of this paper discusses the current trend towards the greater use of first hand data. It showcases several recent projects from across the globe that have used primary sources to deepen our understanding of terrorism and related forms of political violence.

2. Primary Data: Terrorism Studies' Achilles' Heel

"[T]here are probably few areas […] where so much is written on the basis of so little research".[2]

2.1 Outlining the problem

The multidisciplinary nature of terrorism research can make it hard to delineate "terrorism studies" as a particular field, or sub-field, of academic inquiry.[3] But however we may wish to label it, one of the most striking characteristics of the huge number of books and articles on terrorism and terrorists is their collective inability to provide definitive answers to fundamental questions. What is terrorism? How is it different from other forms of warfare such as insurgency? Why and when do people resort to this form of political violence? One author with a particularly keen eye for the roots of this problem is Andrew Silke. In his frequently cited 2001 analysis, Silke argues that despite thirty years of effort, the study of terrorism has failed to reach academic maturity and as a result "struggles in its efforts to explain terrorism or to provide findings of genuine predictive value".[4]

Silke presents several explanations for this worrisome state of affairs. Because of its violent and secretive nature, terrorism is by definition a difficult subject to investigate. Objectivity is another issue, with some researchers principally concerned with fighting terrorism rather than understanding it. But no less worrying is researchers' overreliance on pre-existing secondary sources of information – essentially books, articles and media reports – and their tendency to use a limited number of methodologies for gathering data.[5] As a result, the share of publications actually presenting *new* information about terrorism remains worryingly small at circa 20 percent.[6]

This brings to light the distinction between secondary sources, which provide indirect and second-hand information on a certain subject, and primary ones, which relate information based on the direct observation of, or participation in, that same subject.[7] To take the example of a car crash, the victims directly involved are potential primary sources of information on what happened, while an article written by a journalist on the same subject is a secondary source as it presents the writer's take on events rather than that of those directly involved. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is not always clear and may depend on the question

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[1] This background note accompanies the seminar on the use of primary sources in terrorism research that was hosted by the International Centre for Counterterrorism (ICCT) in The Hague on the 29th of May, 2013.

[2] 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), p. 179.

[3] Edna F. Reid and Hsinchun Chen, "Mapping the Contemporary Terrorism Research Domain", *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 65, no. 1 (2007), pp. 53; Andrew Silke, "An Introduction to Terrorism Research", in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London / New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 26-27.

[4] Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001), pp. 13.

[5] Ibid., pp. 4-9.

[6] Ibid., p. 5.

[7] "What Is a Primary Source?", Princeton University, http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html.

being asked. For instance, public prosecutors cannot be considered primary sources of information regarding the group dynamics within a terrorist network as they did not observe them directly. On the other hand, the public prosecutor does become a primary source when the researcher wants to know how the defendants behaved in court or how the prosecution views a particular case. Sometimes authors refer to a need for more empirically-based research.[8] Empirical research studies subjects based on information derived through their observation and measurement, rather than based on theoretical arguments that are not necessarily substantiated by references to observable reality. While empirical data and primary sources are not interchangeable synonyms, they are closely related to one another. Authors drawing attention to them share a common concern for the lack of research on terrorism that is based on reliable data derived from observation rather than theorising.[9]

Returning to Silke's analysis of the worrisome state of terrorism studies, the argument could be made that one article written over ten years ago is insufficient grounds to condemn the field as a whole. It could be that things have improved over the course of the past decade. Perhaps Silke's perspective on the state of affairs was just an especially gloomy one. Unfortunately, some important developments notwithstanding, the problems highlighted by Silke in 2001 are in many ways no less acute today, and he is joined by many leading scholars of terrorism in calling attention to them.

To begin with, it is important to note that Silke explicitly compares his study with similar work conducted by Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman in 1988. Both publications essentially highlight the same concerns: an overreliance on secondary data, indicating that by the beginning of the twenty-first century these issues had been plaguing the field for decades and had shown no real signs of abating.[10] Since 2001, Silke has written several other publications on the topic. His 2009 update notes some important improvements to the field; much more collaborative work, an encouraging growth in the use of inferential statistics and more researchers.[11] Nevertheless, the old problems are still very much present, was the majority of research remains qualitative with a strong emphasis on literature review methods.[12]

There is nothing wrong with the literature review method itself, but the overreliance on this form of research has starved terrorism studies of the empirical data needed to validate the claims and theories being presented.[13] Instead of referring to primary sources of data, such as interviews with (former) terrorists, transcripts of their interrogations or intercepted communications, most publications on terrorism speak amongst themselves. They cite other articles, books and newspaper items as the evidentiary basis for the explanations put forward. In turn, these sources cite yet *other* articles and books, resulting in what Magnus Ranstorp and Adam Dolnik have called a "highly unreliable closed and circular research system, functioning in a constantly reinforcing feedback loop".[14] Finding the actual empirical data at the end of these evidentiary chains can be challenging. The heavy use of newspaper items and other media-based sources of information raises concerns about the accuracy and objectivity of the information being presented by scholars.[15] As Schmid points out, data in the public domain is frequently unable to clarify seemingly basic questions such as who was responsible for a certain attack.[16] In addition, media sources tend to underreport or simply ignore failed or foiled terrorist attacks, leading to significant information gaps for those who rely on such sources.[17]

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[8] Frederick Schulze, "Breaking the Cycle: Empirical Research and Postgraduate Studies on Terrorism," in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London / New York: Frank Cass, 2004).

[9] Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011), p. 616; Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know", p. 13.

[10] Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know", pp. 3-4.

[11] Andrew Silke, "Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research", in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Abingdon / New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 39-43.

[12] Ibid., pp. 40-41 and 48.

[13] John Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research", in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London / New York: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 30.

[14] The quote is Dolnik's, who paraphrases Ranstorp. See: Adam Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research on Terrorism: A Brief Primer", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 2 (2011), p. 5; Magnus Ranstorp, "Introduction: Mapping Terrorism Research - Challenges and Priorities", in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (London / New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 6.

[15] Schulze, "Breaking the Cycle", 163; Tom Quiggin, "Words Matter: Peer Review as a Failing Safeguard". *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2013), pp. 72-76.

[16] Alex P. Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism", in Alex P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London / New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 461.

[17] Ibid.

Consequently, "much has been claimed, but critical issues remain concerning the quality of the evidence being used to justify many claims".[18] A 2006 study by Cynthia Lum, Leslie Kennedy and Alison Sherley found that "only 3% of articles from peer-reviewed sources appeared to be based on some form of empirical analysis".[19] Such a state of affairs is of course not conducive to the development of our understanding of terrorism and authors such as Frederick Schulze see the lack of empirically grounded research as a tremendous problem that keeps the entire field from moving forward.[20] Other renowned terrorism scholars, among them Martha Crenshaw and Alex Schmid, have expressed similar worries about the lack of research grounded in sound primary data.[21] In fact, concern for the limited use of such sources in the field of terrorism studies is a recurring theme that can be found not just in overview articles that survey the field of terrorism studies as a whole, but also in many works that focus on particular aspects of the phenomenon, such as contemporary (counter-)terrorism and home-grown jihadism.[22] Clearly there is still a great need for more primary data- driven research on terrorism.

2.2 Conclusion

Since its inception in the 1960s, terrorism studies as an academic discipline has suffered from a scarcity of primary sources-based research. Although the sizeable literature on (counter-)terrorism presents readers with a multitude of theories and explanations, ranging from what constitute terrorism's "root causes" to how it can best be countered or prevented, the lack of sufficient empirical testing makes it very difficult to distinguish between explanations that are merely *possible* and those that are *likely*, let alone *proven*, to be valid. Ultimately, these concerns should not just affect the academic community but also resonate with policymakers and counter-terrorism practitioners. It would be naïve to posit that government officials are dependent on the work of academics to devise approaches to preventing and countering terrorism. But the fact that much research on terrorism is government-sponsored is a clear indication that interest in research on terrorism extends beyond the academic community. At the end of the day, access to more reliable first-hand sources can offer significant benefits to academics and policymakers alike.

3. Explaining the Scarcity of Primary Sources

3.1 A difficult subject to research?

If the problem is so well-documented, why has a lack of primary sources-based research been such a defining characteristic of terrorism studies for the past several decades? A frequently encountered explanation is that terrorism is simply a difficult subject to study.[23] The applied nature of terrorism research, with its focus on contemporary, constantly evolving phenomena, makes it less "easily amenable to the more rigorous scientific approaches".[24] There is also the question of personal danger to researchers. Despite claims that such risks may be overstated and can usually be managed, undertaking fieldwork to interview or otherwise interact with known terrorists retains an element of danger that may dissuade less intrepid scholars.[25] Perhaps more importantly, the

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[18] Andrew Silke, "Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization", *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2008), p. 101.

[19] Cynthia Lum, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alison J. Sherley, "The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies", *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, no. 2 (2006), p. 8.

[20] Schulze, "Breaking the Cycle", pp. 161-63.

[21] Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century", *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000), p. 405; Schmid, "Introduction", p. 33; "The Literature on Terrorism", pp. 459-60 and 69; Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", *ICCT Research Paper* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013), pp. 2,20, 25, 30-31 and 55.

[22] C.J. De Poot et al., *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands: A Description Based on Closed Criminal Investigations* (The Hague: Boom Juridische Uitgevers / Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum, 2011), p. 23; Teun Van Dongen, "Not Quite There Yet: The State of the Art in Counterterrorism Research" (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2009), p. 29; Frazer Egerton, *Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 45; Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009), pp. 9-11 and 70; Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010), pp. 811-12.

[23] Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research", p. 4; Silke, "The Devil You Know", p. 2; Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research", p. 30.

[24] Andrew Silke, "An Introduction to Terrorism Research", p. 11.

[25] John Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research", pp. 48-50; Andrew Silke, "An Introduction to Terrorism Research", pp. 13-15; Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research", p. 4; Schulze, "Breaking the Cycle", pp. 181-82; Alessandro Orsini, "A Day among the Diehard Terrorists: The

violent and secretive nature of terrorism presents researchers with several practical obstacles when it comes to conducting empirical research.[26]

One way of gaining empirically grounded insights into (counter-)terrorism is through participant-observation. Such an approach can yield valuable information, as can be seen, for example, in Jeffrey Sluka's work on public support for Northern Irish terrorist groups.[27] At the same time, field research is distinctly time consuming and demanding, especially when it entails a prolonged period of work in remote locations, as well as accompanied by ethical dilemmas and a definite degree of risk to the researcher. Furthermore, there are considerable practical difficulties involved with finding an active terrorist group and convincing them to allow a researcher to study them for a prolonged period of time.[28] While authors like Harmonie Toros and Adam Dolnik are undoubtedly right to call for more field work in terrorism studies, it is not hard to see why so relatively few students of terrorism have employed this methodology.[29]

Another option is to seek out (former) terrorists for interviews. While less controversial and perhaps less demanding for the individuals who are the subject of the research, it is still a time consuming activity in which success is not guaranteed, even when it concerns currently defunct groups such as the IRA or the Red Brigades.[30] The authors' own research into the Dutch Hofstadgroup has provided ample examples of the challenges involved. Most of the individuals who were asked to participate declined, frequently on the grounds that they did not wish to revisit a difficult period of their lives. Those who agreed to an initial meeting often did so only after months of phone calls and emails. Meetings were frequently postponed or cancelled at the very last minute and even when face-to-face contact was established, some individuals chose not to cooperate further. Ultimately, the insights gained from those who did agree to participate more than outweighed the costs, but interviews with (former) extremists are not necessarily an easy or straightforward way of gathering primary data.[31]

Government agencies such as police forces and intelligence organisations constitute a third potential source of primary data on terrorism. Unfortunately for researchers, gaining access to such files can prove very difficult as most organisations involved in counter-terrorism are very reluctant to share their data for security and privacy-related reasons.[32] While these concerns are certainly warranted, the higher quality research that can result from access to such files will almost certainly outweigh the potential risks. Furthermore, the provision of clear terms of use for any government files and the institution of basic background checks on the researchers who are granted access can make these risks distinctly manageable.

As mentioned earlier, the study of terrorism is strongly wedded to qualitative research designs. The post-9/11 trend towards using more statistical analyses that Silke noted, marks a shift towards more quantitative research. This change has been made possible in part by the creation of databases with quantified information on terrorist events, which constitute a fourth source of empirical data. These databases contain data such as the number of attacks, the target location, the geographical origin of the terrorists, the weapons used etc.[33] By analysing this information in conjunction with country-level data such as GDP, government type, foreign policy and involvement in armed conflicts, researchers such as James Piazza and Quan Li have advanced our understanding of the interplay between structural-level conditions and the occurrence of terrorism.[34] The

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Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (2013), pp. 337-51; Ranstorp, "Introduction", pp. 2-3.

[26] Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism", pp. 461-62.

[27] Jeffrey A. Sluka, *Hearts and Minds, Water and Fish: Support for the Ira and Inla in a Northern Irish Ghetto* (Greenwich, CT / London: JAI Press, 1989).

[28] Harmonie Toros, "Terrorists, Scholars and Ordinary People: Confronting Terrorism Studies with Field Experiences", *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2008), pp. 279-80, 86-90; Dennis Rodgers, "Making Danger a Calling: Anthropology, Violence and the Dilemmas of Participant Observation", in *Crisis States Programme Working Paper Series No. 1* (London: London School of Economics, 2001), pp. 1-18.

[29] Toros, "Terrorists, Scholars and Ordinary People", p. 280; Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research", pp. 30-31.

[30] King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists", p. 618; Orsini, "A Day among the Diehard Terrorists", pp. 337-51; Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research", pp. 30-56.

[31] "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 3 (2012), pp. 199-203.

[32] Pete Lentini, ""If They Know Who Put the Sugar It Means They Know Everything": Understanding Terrorist Activity Using Operation Pendennis Wiretap (Listening Device and Telephone Intercept) Transcripts", in *ARC Linkage Project on Radicalisation* (Monash University, Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University, 2010), pp. 7-8.

[33] Neil G. Bowie and Alex P. Schmid, "Databases on Terrorism", in Alex P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London / New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 294-340.

[34] James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?", *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2008), pp. 469-88; "Do Democracy and Free Markets Protect Us from Terrorism?", *International Politics* 45, no. 1 (2008), pp. 72-

descriptive nature of much of the information in such databases – what happened, where did it happen, how many people were injured, how many were killed etc. – places less of a premium on access to primary sources. After all, such raw data on terrorism incidents can often, though certainly not always, be found in a variety of open sources. Nevertheless, there are still concerns that an overreliance on media sources has introduced factual errors and biases that negatively affect the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the use of these databases.[35] Although the emphasis of this background note is on qualitative research, the potential challenges posed by a lack of reliable sources on terrorism have affected the field in its entirety.

3.2 Critically examining primary sources

Precisely because of the practical difficulties entailed in acquiring primary data on terrorism, the excitement of finally securing access to that particular government archive or speaking with an elusive former terrorist can obscure the fact that such data still needs to be critically examined. Like any source, the reliability and (im)partiality of any primary data must be assessed to ensure the research built on it is as objective and factually accurate as possible.

Two issues in particular are the objectivity and reliability of the sources. Police files, for example, are generally reliable but, as they have been created to facilitate criminal prosecution, they cannot be considered completely objective accounts. The information within them was not collated with the intention of providing as neutral a perspective on the activities of the suspects as possible, but with the specific aim of collecting evidence to substantiate a criminal charge. As Donatella della Porta has argued, researchers should attempt to supplement such official accounts with the perspectives of the suspects themselves.[36] But interviews, both with (former) terrorists and counter-terrorism officials, raise their own set of reliability-related issues. In a general sense the interviewer must assess the extent to which the interviewee is able to clearly recall his or her emotions, actions and motivations from a frequently distant past. Has the simple passage of time impacted the interview's usefulness as source material? Perhaps harder to assess is the question whether or not the interviewee is deliberately misleading the interviewer. This underlines the necessity of having multiple sources of data so as to have at least some means of verifying information through corroboration.

Privacy and security-related concerns form another obstacle to obtaining and using primary sources for research on terrorism. Government employees involved in counter-terrorism and (former) terrorists or extremists will in many cases insist on anonymity as a prerequisite for participating in research. Although this can be formally arranged with interview consent forms, privacy-related concerns may be such that the hardest part of the interview process is approaching and convincing potential interviewees that participation comes at negligible risk to themselves. Gaining trust can be an important prerequisite for success that applies also to the use of government sources. Getting to know those involved in the vetting process for an application and acquiring a feel for the concerns of the parties responsible for maintaining the files can be a valuable asset for gaining access.

One important consequence of these security and privacy-related concerns is that researchers are sometimes not at liberty to share their sources completely with the wider academic community. Although this is understandable, it does raise serious concerns about research ethics. Especially the ability of academic peers to independently assess the validity and accuracy of findings based upon access to such primary sources. There is no easy or completely satisfactory way to address this issue. Where possible, efforts should be made to provide references to open sources which contain similar information.

91; Quan Li, "Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 2 (2005), pp. 278-97.

[35] Joshua Sinai, "New Trends in Terrorism Studies: Strengths and Weaknesses", in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (London / New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 43-44; Todd Sandler and Walter Enders, "Applying Analytical Methods to Study Terrorism", *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no. 3 (2007), p. 290; Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism", pp. 338-40.

[36] Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 18-19.

4. Towards a Greater Use of Primary Sources: Some Examples

The years since 9/11 have seen a tremendous increase in the number of publications on (counter-)terrorism. Unfortunately, this has not always led to a deeper understanding of the many facets of this phenomenon. The aim of this background note, however, is not to lay blame or point fingers. Collecting or gaining access to primary sources is no small task and the present authors are the first to admit their own reliance on secondary sources as the point of departure for much of their own research. It should also be noted that, as John Horgan and Jessica Stern point out in a recent opinion piece, in spite of these problems the field of terrorism studies has certainly not stagnated.[37] It is moving forward; slowly, perhaps, but with an increasingly diverse use of methodologies and with increasing awareness of the need to address the shortcomings of an overreliance on secondary sources.

This section highlights several recent examples of primary sources-driven research from across the globe. Whilst in no way an exhaustive list and admittedly somewhat skewed in favour of the local context the authors know best, it is hoped that this overview will inspire others to undertake similar research and convince government stakeholders to cooperate in facilitating these endeavours where possible.

4.1 Examples of primary sources-driven research on terrorism
Defining the psychological characteristics of suicide bombers
In 2009, Ariel Merari *et al* published research based on in-depth interviews with would-be suicide bombers who were captured by Israeli security forces at, or on their way to, their intended targets. Their research stands out not just for managing to procure psychological data on an especially difficult form of terrorism, but also for being among the first to take such an empirical approach to studying this subject. Their research produced several valuable findings, such as that the suicide bombers in their sample were relatively easily influenced by authoritative individuals, that a significant number of them displayed signs of depression-related ailments, and the leading role of nationalistic motives.[38]

Examining homegrown jihadism in Australia using wire taps & interviews
Researchers at Monash University's Global Terrorism Research Centre (GTReC) in Melbourne, Australia, are carrying out a four-year project on various aspects of radicalisation.[39] Through their cooperation with the Australian Federal Police, they have been able to gain access to the transcripts of wiretaps used in Operation Pendennis, the largest terrorism investigation in the country's history. Although the project is still ongoing, numerous publications that are heavily reliant on these sources have already appeared. Published in the some of the major terrorism journals, these studies have made detailed contributions to our understanding of the organisational structure and internal functioning of so-called "home-grown" jihadist groups in Australia. In addition to the wiretap transcripts, Monash researchers have also conducted extensive interviews with incarcerated terrorists.[40]

Understanding the escalation of violence through field work in Asia and South America
As part of their doctoral theses, Utrecht University's Joerg LeBlanc and Alastair Reed conducted extensive field work South America and Asia respectively. By interviewing (former) members of insurgent and terrorist organisations, the researchers have gained a better understanding of the processes governing the escalation and

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[37] John Horgan and Jessica Stern, "Terrorism Research Has Not Stagnated", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 May 2013.

[38] Ariel Merari et al., "Personality Characteristics of 'Self Martyrs' / 'Suicide Bombers' and Organizers of Suicide Attacks", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2009), pp. 96-97; Ariel Merari et al., "Making Palestinian 'Martyrdom Operations' / 'Suicide Attacks': Interviews with Would-Be Perpetrators and Organizers", p. 110.

[39] Monash Radicalisation Project, "Understanding Radicalisation, De-radicalisation and Counter-radicalisation from an Australian Perspective" (Faculty of Arts, Monash University), http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/radicalisation/.

[40] Shandon Harris-Hogan, "Australian Neo-Jihadist Terrorism: Mapping the Network and Cell Analysis Using Wiretap Evidence", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012), pp. 298-314; "Anatomy of a Terrorist Cell: A Study of the Network Uncovered in Sydney in 2005", *Behavorial Sciences of Terrorism & Political Aggression* 5, no. 2 (2013), pp. 137-54; Lentini, ""If They Know Who Put the Sugar It Means They Know Everything": Understanding Terrorist Activity Using Operation Pendennis Wiretap (Listening Device and Telephone Intercept) Transcripts", pp. 1-35.

de-escalation of conflict-related violence over time. Their work is another reminder that field work is possible, as well as potentially very rewarding, even in potentially dangerous regions such as Mindanao in the Philippines.[41]

Exploring patterns of behaviour of jihadist terrorists using court records
Lindsay Clutterbuck and Richard Warns, both researchers at the RAND corporation, conducted an examination of the behaviour of 38 individuals who had been involved in serious terrorist conspiracies in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2007. Their goal was to analyse the extent to which behaviours could be identified that could be used as indicators by law enforcement agencies to prevent or disrupt future terrorist plots. As such, they required detailed information on the activities of the individuals in their study. By using information from their trials, as well as information derived from the criminal investigations and court records of evidence, the authors were able to obtain the data required to chart the suspects' behaviour in detail. Their research has hinted at the existence of specific patterns of behaviour which could be used to identify and disrupt a potential attack before it has taken place.[42]

Empirically-driven research on terrorism in Indonesia
Sulastri Osman, associate research fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, seeks to gain a better understanding of what motivates individuals to engage in violence as well as the factors that can bring about disengagement. As part of the effort she has been conducting fieldwork in Indonesia with a strong emphasis on conducting interviews with incarcerated terrorists.[43] A similar emphasis on collecting empirical data is found in a recent special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, which highlights the work of several authors who have used interview methodologies and surveys to study various aspects of terrorism in Indonesia, from the motives of perpetrators to the influence leader-figures can have on radicalisation processes and the popular support for religious violence among Indonesian Muslims.[44]

An empirical analysis of the Dutch prison system's "terrorism wing"
In 2011, Tinka Veldhuis and her co-authors published a study in which they evaluated the special detention facility for terrorism-related offenders that the Dutch authorities opened in 2006. The study is built on a variety of primary sources gained through empirical data collection such as interviews with government stakeholders and inmates and the use of questionnaires. The study is illustrative of how secondary and primary sources can be used in conjunction; the secondary sources primarily inform the debate and provide contextual information while the primary sources provide the brunt of the data on which the conclusions are based.[45] In a related research paper, Veldhuis and Eelco Kessels call for more research on the detention and rehabilitation of extremist offenders as prerequisites for developing well-informed approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE).[46]

Studying jihadi terrorism in the Netherlands using police files
Also in 2011, Christianne de Poot et al. published the English translation of their research on jihadi terrorism in the Netherlands. The study describes how this phenomenon manifested itself in the Netherlands between 2001 and 2005 and provides details on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from the socio-cultural background of those

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[41] Joerg Le Blanc, *Political Violence in Latin America: A Cross-Case Comparison of the Urban Insurgency Campaigns of Monteneros, M-19 and Fsln in a Historical Perspective* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Alastair Reed, *Comparative Analysis of Ethno-Separatist Conflict in India and the Philippines* (Forthcoming 2014).
[42] Lindsay Clutterbuck and Richard Warnes, "Exploring Patterns of Behaviour in Violent Jihadist Terrorists: An Analysis of Six Significant Terrorist Conspiracies in the UK", (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), pp. 49-51.
[43] Sulastri Osman, "Notes from the Field", in *ARC linkage project on radicalisation - conference 2012: Terrorism and counter-terrorism in Australia and Indonesia: 10 years after Bali* (Monash University Law Chambers, Melbourne, Australia, 2012), http://www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/about_cens/staff_profile_sulastri.html/.
[44] Idhamsyah Eka Putra and Zora A. Sukabdi, "Basic Concepts and Reasons Behind the Emergence of Religious Terror Activities in Indonesia: An inside View", *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2013), pp. 83-91; Hamdi Muluk, Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, and Dhyah Madya Ruth, "Jihad as Justification: National Survey Evidence of Belief in Violent Jihad as a Mediating Factor for Sacred Violence among Muslims in Indonesia", pp. 101-11; Mirra Noor Milla, Faturochman, and Djamaludin Ancok, "The Impact of Leader–Follower Interactions on the Radicalization of Terrorists: A Case Study of the Bali Bombers", pp. 92-100.
[45] Tinka Veldhuis et al., "Terroristen in Detentie: Evaluatie Van De Terroristenafdeling" (The Hague: WODC, 2010).
[46] Tinka M. Veldhuis and Eelco J.A.M. Kessels, "Thinking before Leaping: The Need for More and Structural Data Analysis in Detention and Rehabilitation of Extremist Offenders" (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013).

involved in the networks to their activities, role models and meeting places. What makes this research unique from the point of view of the sources used is that the authors had access to the police files on these groups. The publication is also a good example of how such sources can be used while maintaining the privacy of those individuals named in them.[47]

Using multiple sources to study jihad in Europe
One of the most prolific authors on jihad in Europe is Petter Nesser, research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment.[48] In his recently published PhD dissertation, Nesser evaluates the patterns in Islamist terrorist cell formation and behaviour over the 1995-2010 timeframe. To address this issue he utilises a variety of sources, ranging from secondary data derived from books, articles and media reports, to judicial documents, official government reports and interviews. These sources include materials produced by the jihadist groups themselves, an important primary source.[49]

5. Conclusion

A lack of research based on primary sources has been one of the major impediments to progress in the field of (counter-)terrorism studies. Although the difficulties involved in gaining access to such sources makes their scarcity understandable, efforts should be made both by academics and policymakers to address this deficiency. As numerous leading experts have warned, the consequences of an overreliance on secondary sources of information, such as newspapers, has led to a great amount of theorising based on a perilously small empirical foundation. Detailed and reliable primary data, such as interviews and government archives, are vital if we are to truly advance our understanding of terrorism: from its causes and precipitating dynamics to the best ways to counter or prevent it.

These concerns affect policymakers, politicians, government agencies as well as private companies involved in counter-terrorism. They are no less reliant on accurate and reliable information on terrorism than researchers. As several of the examples of primary-sources driven research have suggested, governments are increasingly aware of this and are making greater efforts to provide researchers with access to data on terrorism. Counter-terrorism practitioners are also becoming more sensitive to the fact that academic research can be a valuable asset in the fight against terrorism. Furthermore, as the examples discussed in this background note highlight, despite various obstacles, obtaining primary data through fieldwork and interviews is certainly feasible. Hopefully this trend towards a greater use of primary sources will continue into the future and provide new avenues for advancing the study of (counter-)terrorism.

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[47] De Poot et al., *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*.
[48] See, for instance: Petter Nesser, "Jihadism in Western Europe after the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq War on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 4 (2006); "How Did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes?", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 2 (2008); "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 10 (2008); "Joining Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe: Exploring Motivational Aspects of Recruitment and Radicalization", in *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (London / New York: Routledge, 2010).
[49] *Jihad in Europe: Patterns in Islamist Terrorist Cell Formation and Behavior, 1995-2010* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2012), pp. 45-54.

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