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### Growth opportunities in American and British terrorism research

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# Growth opportunities in American and British terrorism research

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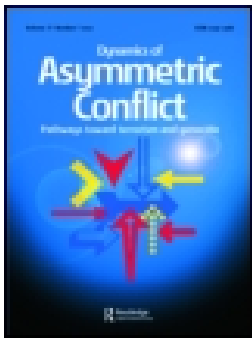


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## Growth opportunities in American and British terrorism research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper identifies what we see as opportunities to improve data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings in American and British terrorism research. We suggest seven directions that we see as promising. These include: 1) interview methods and reporting, 2) source reporting in database studies, prioritizing available court records, 3) more comparison groups, including non-offender activists for the same cause and non-political offenders, 4) comparison of cases with and without confidential informants, 5) extremist ideas and extremist violence studied as separate problems, 6) more attention to grievances, avoiding controversies over defining ideology and narrative, and 7) more attention to emotions of terrorists, their supporters, and their victims.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Terrorism; radicalization; research methods; bias; qualitative; quantitative; informants; ideology; emotions; base-rate

The twentieth anniversary of 9/11 recognized a great expansion of terrorism research (Phillips, 2021). A number of researchers have recently pointed out some of the field's achievements, as well as some of its shortcomings (Schmid, et al., 2021; Haghani, Kuligowski, Rajabifard, & Lentini, 2022; McNeil-Willson, 2007). Here, we focus on what we see as some of the field's opportunities to build upon its recent advances by continuing to improve data collection, analyses, interpretations, and broad conceptualizations.

In what follows, we identify seven growth opportunities in American and British terrorism research, including those relating to (1) qualitative data; (2) quantitative data; (3) comparison groups; (4) use of confidential informants by security forces; (5) terrorism as a low base-rate prediction problem; (6) over-reliance on ideology and narrative as explanatory factors; and (7) under-reliance on emotions as explanatory factors. The first four represent opportunities to improve methods for obtaining and analysing data to inform terrorism research. The last three are opportunities to improve concepts and theory for interpreting these data. By identifying these opportunities, we hope to further expand the envelope of terrorism research.

## Evaluating terrorism research: How are we doing?

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks increased scholarly interest in studying terrorism, but a few seminal pre-9/11 studies (Crenshaw, 1992; Enders & Sandler, 1995; Gibbs, 1989; Gurr, 1988; Hoffman, 1992; Horgan, 1997; McCauley, 1991; Merari, 1991; Miller, 1988; Reid, 1997; Silke, 1996) provided a strong foundation to draw upon.

Several research reviews published before 9/11 highlighted methodological limitations. Gurr (1988) for example, argued that the terrorism field was conceptually strong, and scholars were devising sophisticated research questions. But he lamented the field's weak methods and concluded that there was "a disturbing lack of good empirically-grounded research on terrorism" (p. 115). Reid's (1997) exploration of terrorism research in the United States found that there were few collaborative studies, and limited funding opportunities. Importantly, Reid, echoing Gurr, concluded that most research did not use empirical data, while a few quantitative studies analysed terrorism incident-level databases, such as the CIA's File on International Terrorist Events (FITE), RAND's terrorism database, and the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorism Events (ITERATE) database. Reid cautioned that these databases had measurement issues, including reliability, coverage and validity.

### *After 9/11*

Since 2001, terrorism scholarship has increased dramatically, as has the number of research reviews. Recent terrorism research reviews have examined theoretical perspectives on terrorism (Harmon, Mujkic, Kaukinen, & Weir, 2018; Lia & Skjølberg, 2010; Schmid, 2013; Turk, 2004), lone actor terrorism (Kenyon, Baker-Beall, & Binder, 2021) terrorism and migration (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2020), female terrorism (Jacques & Taylor, 2009), tourism and terrorism (Gamage, Illangarathne, Kumudumali, & Nedelea, 2020) climate change and terrorism (Asaka, 2021) and counter-terrorism strategies (Bartlett & Reynolds, 2015; Ugorji, 2015). Most of these reviews have highlighted methodological limitations and/or empirical gaps in the literature (Freilich, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2015; Freilich, Gruenewald, & Mandala, 2019; Haghani et al., 2022; Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2006; Phillips, 2021; Sandler, 2014; Silke, 2009).

Overall, these reviews tend to agree on several conclusions. First, terrorism research greatly increased after 9/11. Silke (2008) notes that over 90% of the total body of terrorism research has been published since the 9/11 attacks. Phillips (2021) similarly finds that there was a 700% increase in the number of terrorism research publications from the ten years before the attacks to the ten years after them.

Second, the breadth of scholarly interest is impressive. Recently, there have been increases in multi-author/multi-discipline collaborative terrorism focused projects. Phillips demonstrates that terrorism publications have appeared in Arts and Literature, Criminology, Computer Science, Economics, Engineering, International Relations, Law, Medicine, Political Science, and Psychology. There has been a 24.5 factor increase in the number of articles published when comparing post to pre 9/11 publications in economics journals, a 21.0 factor increase in psychology journals, a 12.3 factor increase in medical journals, and a 6.3 factor increase in criminology journals.

Third, these reviews identified important concerns about measurement. Many terrorism studies still suffer from weak methodological designs and leading conceptual frameworks have not been rigorously tested (Freilich & LaFree, 2015; LaFree & Dugan, 2007; Sageman, 2004; Silke, 2001). Borum's critique of the radicalization literature concluded that, "primarily these efforts are conceptual, rather than empirical" (p.37). Lum et al. (2006) review of over 14,000 terrorism articles published between 1971 and 2003 found that only 3% were empirical (see also Merari, 1991; Schuurman, 2020; Silke, 2001, 2008, 2009).

### ***Methodological developments***

Scholars have begun to address some of these measurement issues. The number of primary data collection efforts has increased, data collection strategies are becoming more diversified (Schuurman, 2020), and more datasets are now publicly available. For example, American terrorism scholars used open sources to create the American Terrorist Study (ATS) (Smith, 1994) U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) (Freilich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin, 2014) U.S. Extremist CyberCrime Database (ECCD) (Holt, Chermak, Freilich, Turner, & Greene-Colozzi, 2023) Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (LaFree & Dugan, 2007), and the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) (LaFree, Jensen, James, & Safer-Lichtenstein, 2018). Scholars are quantitatively analysing these databases to address a series of incident, offender, victim, and organizational-level questions.

American and British research that studies patterns of crime and criminal offending have historically relied on three sources of data: police data like the American Uniform Crime Reports; the (American) National Crime Victimization Survey and the British Crime Survey (population-based samples of victimization surveys), and self-report offender survey studies such as the (American) National Youth Survey and the (British) Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. These data sources are not always relevant for the study of terrorism for several reasons. First, terrorism is difficult to define, and most "terrorism incidents" are not prosecuted as such. Most individuals who commit politically motivated offences in the United States are prosecuted in local courts, and charged with "ordinary" crimes (Smith, 1994) such as homicide or aggravated assault (Freilich et al., 2014). Second, no government office is charged with systematically collecting data related to politically motivated offenders. A hodgepodge of policy and watch-groups, media outlets, and academics attempt to track these incidents on an ad hoc basis. Third, terrorism is a rare event, which poses challenges to both qualitative and quantitative method. We discuss some of these challenges in the following sections.

### **Improving qualitative data**

It is often claimed that researchers rarely interview terrorists due to safety issues and the challenges of gaining access (Merari, 1991). However, the interview method is one of the most common qualitative research strategies used by terrorism scholars. Terrorism researchers have interviewed American, Asian, European, South American, African, and Middle-Eastern terrorists, as well as anti-abortion, left-wing, right-wing, eco and animal rights, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Sikh terrorists, among others (see for e.g., Altier, Boyle, Shorthand, & Horgan, 2019; Azca, Ikhwan, & Arrobi, 2019; Berko & Erez, 2007;

Blanchard & Prewitt, 1993; Bloom, 2005, 2012; Chernov Hwang, 2017; Della Porta, 1995; Horgan, 2004, 2009, 2012; Jurgensmeyer, 2003; Kaplan, 1996; Kenney, 2018; Orsini, 2013; Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003; Stern, 2003; White, 1993).

### ***Limitations of terrorist interviews***

Unfortunately, many American and British terrorism interview studies use weak methodological designs (Harris, Simi, & Ligon, 2016). First, many terrorism studies only interview terrorists and lack a comparison group, and thus are unable to determine if any of their findings distinguish terrorists from non-terrorists (Victoroff, 2005). Second, none of these interviews occurred before the individuals became terrorists and few were conducted while the offender was engaging in terrorism. Instead, most of the interviews were conducted after the individual had “retired” from terrorism, in many cases long after, and the questions often engaged issues that occurred in the distant past.<sup>1</sup> (Horgan 2009) notes that the “involvement and engagement in terrorism result in changes to those who join” (p. 4). Thus, these terrorism interview studies may be undermined by “retrospective construction,” the tendency to construct specific motives and actions as significant in retrospect.

Third, many American and British terrorism offender interview studies suffer from sampling weaknesses. Few of these studies identified the entire terrorist group population and compiled a sampling frame (a listing of each terrorist) from the terrorist group or movement they were interested in, and then randomly selected/sampled from that population. In other words, terrorism interview studies do not use probability sampling, which is indeed often difficult because of issues of access, safety (see above), subject privacy and related IRB issues, and the difficulty of identifying an entire hidden population.

Instead, terrorism interview studies use non-probability sampling strategies, and while a few use stronger strategies, such as grounded-theory or life histories (e.g., Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016; see also Azca et al., 2019; Chernov Hwang, 2017) this is rare. In fact, many of these studies do not provide details about the non-probability sampling strategies they pursued (Harris et al., 2016) and few try to weigh the costs versus the benefits of, for instance, choosing between snowball versus quota non-probability sampling strategies. It appears many studies use convenience sampling strategies, the weakest non-probability sampling strategy. Because of the non-probability strategies employed, generalizability of results is limited, and no conclusions can be drawn about a particular terrorist population or about comparison of one terrorist population with another (though some studies nonetheless make such comparisons).

### ***Interview suggestions from criminology***

Criminology has a long history of conducting offender self-report studies to gain insight into the aetiology of offending (Menard, Bowman-Bowen, & Lu, 2016,). Unlike terrorism interview studies, though, these studies usually employ more rigorous designs to improve accuracy (Dugan & Distler, 2016; Freilich & LaFree, 2016) for instance, probability sampling (like cluster analysis) to access adolescents in a city’s schools. The researchers then

question a large sample (some of whom committed delinquency and many others who have not), thus ensuring a comparison group.

Criminological studies often use closed-ended survey questions that offer efficiency in data coding and quantitative analysis, but sometimes include a few open-ended interview items as well. In addition, unlike American and British terrorism studies that often ask about an extended reference period that may include the offender's entire life, criminologists typically ask about relatively short time periods, such as the last 6–12 months. Shorter time intervals guard against memory decay. Further, unlike American and British terrorism interviews (but see Kenney, 2018; see also Azca et al., 2019; Chernov Hwang, 2017) that invariably consist of a single interview with each subject, larger-scale criminology interviews are often longitudinal, with interviews occurring every year or every three years. In this way, prior interviews “bound” subsequent interviews, and serve as additional checks for accuracy.

Importantly, criminologists often seek to triangulate interview data by interviewing a respondent's parents, peers, or teachers, and collecting additional records from police or school to check the accuracy of a respondent's interview answers. Criminological studies also often discuss the nature of survey instruments, highlighting prior studies that have validated them, and often describe interview settings and interactions, including probing to clarify ambiguous replies or contradictory responses, as well as non-verbal gestures or facial reactions of the respondent. Conversely, American and British terrorism interview studies rarely engage triangulation, the validation of their interview instruments, the interview setting, translation issues (if interviewing a foreign terrorist), respondent memory, interviewer effects like reactivity, respondent credibility, whether they crafted methodological memos after each interview and whether initial interviews affected subsequent ones (Dugan & Distler, 2016; Freilich et al., 2015; Freilich & LaFree, 2016; Harris et al., 2016; but see Bloom, 2005 for terrorism research using triangulation strategies).

## Improving quantitative data

One reason that publications on terrorism and domestic violent extremism have increased dramatically is access to open-source databases – a relatively novel form of data increasingly used in the social sciences, and in criminology specifically. Open-source data collection represents a *process of systematically accumulating crime- or terrorist-related information from publicly available written materials, which are then carefully mined, assembled, and codified quantitatively* (Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017). It is an approach that has successfully overcome many of the data challenges to studying rare events such as terrorism, mass shootings, and school shootings.

### *Advantages of open-source databases*

There are at least four advantages to using open-source research strategies. First, the combination of public and media interest in terrorism events, and web-based access to public information, means that some terrorism data are available from most countries in the world. LaFree (2010, p. 24) explains that “the salience of terrorism as a phenomenon today makes it more likely than ever that media will report such incidents as information



becomes available.” Second, open-source databases can provide fuller and richer data capturing more constructs from major criminological theories (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013a; Parkin & Freilich, 2015; Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017). For example, a study that compared open source to official data sources found that open source methodologies captured as much or more information on every variable measured. Importantly, difficult to capture geographic data were also more accessible in the open-source data (Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017). Third, open-source data provide opportunities to study both rare events and difficult to access populations (Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017). Fourth, the amount and type of data are not constrained by an outside source but only limited by what is not presented in open sources. Previous research shows that the amount of accessible information is significant and it has provided scholars opportunities to study problems in new ways (Ackerman & Pinson, 2016; Dugan & Distler, 2016; LaFree, 2010; Ly Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017).

### ***Limitations of open-source databases***

Despite the increased use of open-source databases, few studies have assessed measurement issues, such as selectivity bias, source type reliability, searcher reliability (such as natural language versus human searches), inter-searcher reliability, search file reliability, individual attribute reliability, interrater reliability, and missing values. There are some discussions of these issues (Greene-Colozzi, Freilich, & Chermak, 2022; LaFree, 2010) and we next highlight some of the key points here.

Most open-source databases rely heavily or exclusively upon media reports. These data are a product of what media sources are used, how competing media accounts are reconciled, and the period of interest. Journalistic practices change over time as outlets evolve and adapt to economic and technological changes, which could change the amount and types of information available. Some open-source databases only collect information available from the Internet. This is problematic because the reliability of media reports varies over time as investigations progress and evidence is compiled, and often the best source on a case (local newspaper coverage) may not be available online. Other databases use only one or two media documents to guide coding decisions, and again such limited use of the full universe of public documents about a case is unlikely to be representative of the issues of interest.

There is also an inherent bias in how reporters produce stories about events. Reporters are expected to produce a large stream of content daily. Many reporters therefore develop routines and short-cuts that assist in efficient news production (Chermak, 2002; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). As reporters work similar cases, they come to develop expectations about how a story should be framed in the news, often reacting to facts with blinders and robotically applying an established frame that generates questions bounded by a preconceived context of an event.

For example, a series of influential terrorism studies have relied upon open-source data to examine “loner” or “lone wolf” terrorists (Gruenewald et al., 2013 Turner, Chermak, & Freilich, 2021). One concern is that reporters may have “expectations” about lone wolf terrorists and thus may present the story in a particular way while ignoring alternatives. Following conventional wisdom, reporters may ask multiple sources if a lone terrorist was mentally ill. In addition, reporters may rely primarily on non-medical opinions of mental

health. Since reporters often do not have these same expectations about group-affiliated terrorists, they are less likely to pursue this same line of questioning for these types of terrorists. Such practices can lead to over-reporting of mental illness for lone terrorist cases, and underreporting for other types of cases.

Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, and Lynch (2012) highlight the potential of open-source bias from publicity and source effects. Publicity effects link directly to the newsworthiness of an event, or the fact that more information is likely to be available for the most serious and extensively covered incidents. Media and crime researchers, for example, report that crime seriousness is an important predictor of media interest, but also that not all serious crimes are covered. For example, although homicides are a high priority news topic, only about 6 out of 10 homicides receive any news coverage at all (Gruenewald et al., 2013). Some incidents receive limited coverage, but others are on the front page for days and their reporters will dive much deeper into an offender's background. These variations reflect what news media organizations think the public wants. But researchers using media reports as data need to be concerned about the type of sources and the number of documents for each case. Highlighting the number and types of documents on each case allows us to empirically explore the nature of the bias introduced by how much information is available about each case. Unfortunately, few open-source terrorism studies provide details about raw open-source data.

Source concerns pertain to bias about the use of specific sources. Media outlets have different political, ideological, geographic, and economic biases that affect how an event is covered. Databases that rely only on media documents should assess media bias. Other databases that compile information from multiple sources, collecting documents from court files, police reports, other government agencies, social media posts, mass media stories, and academic sources allow researchers to consider the reliability of each source. For example, an appellate decision that articulates the facts of a case, based upon trial testimony that was subject to witnesses taking an oath and undergoing cross examination, is more reliable than a media report published immediately after an incident occurred.

### ***Missing data***

One major concern with open-source database studies is missing data (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2022). Researchers often confront search files that do not include information about all the variables they seek to code. There is often missing information about an incident, and the missingness can vary by case and attributes. Many researchers reframe their variables to ask, is this attribute (for e.g., the offender has military experience) present in the open-source information on the case? These researchers thus code both clear "no's" and cases where the issue is simply not discussed (i.e., missing) as "no" codes. This research strategy eliminates missing values, but critics contend that it inflates the number of "no's," creating a bias if reporters are systematically not following up on specific types of variables. This is a controversial and unsettled issue with important implications for analyses and interpretation.

There are ways to minimize the impact of missingness. First, there is a strong relationship between time spent on source data collection and researchers' ability to identify needed information. Relying upon a single search engine like Google will be limited by

the nature of that search engine's algorithm. Researchers should thus use 1) multiple generalized search engines like Google.com and Bing.com; 2) metasearch engines, such as Dogpile, 3) data aggregators, and 4) specialized search engines that reflect the topic of concern. For example, a terrorism search protocol should include the Homeland Security Digital Library, the Central Intelligence Agency's Center for the Study of Intelligence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's monthly publication, *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, and press releases from the Department of Justice and the FBI. Second, missingness can also be managed with analytic strategies, such as data imputation, but to do this effectively researchers have to better understand the bias in their data.

### **Better use of comparison groups**

In terrorism research, both qualitative and quantitative studies typically focus on who becomes a terrorist without any *non-terrorist comparison groups* (Klausen, 2016; Smith, 2018a, b). Criminologists have confronted similar issues and many scholars thus focus on intra-group characteristics, such as comparative studies of offending groups and offender typologies. These studies often identify similarities and differences across individuals of a similar criminogenic category and offender typologies.

### **Comparison with other offenders**

Terrorism researchers have mimicked this strategy and have disaggregated terrorists to compare subcategories to each other. For example, terrorism scholars have compared far-right to far-left to jihadi terrorists, loner to group-affiliated terrorists, among many other comparisons (Chermak et al., 2012; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Corner & Gill, 2015; Gruenewald et al., 2013; LaFree et al., 2018; Parkin, Freilich, & Chermak, 2015; Smith, 1994). This research is valuable because it isolates distinctive paths for certain perpetrators and provides crucial information for policymakers and practitioners. Conversely, the absence of relevant comparison groups as controls (i.e., the "0s") hinders our ability to identify factors that are unique to the terrorists. LaFree (2015) argues that control-group comparisons are an important final step in the empirical study of terrorists.

Indeed, this issue highlights a key question: *who should be included in the comparison group* (Freilich et al., 2015)? Scholars have pursued a variety of strategies. Some have compared terrorists to non-political, "parallel" offenders (Gruenewald, 2011; Gruenewald & Pridemore, 2012; Horgan & Gill, 2016; Lankford, 2013; McCauley, Moskalenko, & Van Son, 2013; Pyrooz, LaFree, Decker, & James, 2017; Smith & Damphousse, 1996) or compared extremists committing ideologically motivated attacks to extremists committing non-political crime (Freilich et al., 2015; Gruenewald, 2011). Such comparisons are useful to determine if the same causal models proposed to explain regular offending are applicable to terrorism, or if different frameworks are needed to account for political crime (Freilich & LaFree, 2015).

Other studies compare terrorists or violent extremists to non-violent extremist offenders like those committing financial or material support crimes (Harms, 2017; Jaško, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2017; Kerodal, et al., 2016). Future studies could extend these efforts and assess if extremist cyber-offenders differ from violent extremists. Here the goal is to

identify what, if any, factors are unique to violent extremism as opposed to non-violent extremist offending.

### ***Comparison with non-offenders***

These two strategies are innovative, but they use comparison groups that also committed crimes. As Freilich et al. (2015) and Monohan (2012) note, a comparison of violent extremists to non-criminal extremists (terrorists vs. activists for the same cause) would be extremely useful. It would allow researchers to identify, for example, what distinguishes supporters of Nazism and Al Qaeda who do not commit crime from those who commit violent acts to further these extreme ideologies (see for e.g., Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Dornschneider, 2016; Ellis et al., 2015). Another approach is to compare terrorists or violent extremists to the general population or the wider sub-community to which they belong (see for e.g., Benmelech & Berrebi, 2007; Berrebi, 2007; Clemmow, 2020; Krueger, 2008). Once again, this kind of study would identify what factors distinguish violent offenders from the rest of society. After all, Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley (2010), demonstrate that less than 1% of persons subscribing to extreme beliefs engage in terrorism.

Finally, studies could also collect information on foiled plots: cases where offenders sought to commit terrorism but were thwarted (see for e.g., Bjelopera & Randol, 2010; McCleskey, McCord, Leetz, & Markey, 2007). These studies compare fatal or completed attacks to the foiled plots to assess the effectiveness of various counter-terrorism interventions including investigation strategies and information sharing, providing insights on what works to prevent or mitigate harm from potential terrorist and targeted violence plots. The studies' findings could aid police in identifying vulnerable targets and in allocating resources for improvements or extra protection. Such studies could also improve ongoing investigations, and help law enforcement and intelligence analysts in threat assessments. Similarly, incident-level studies that compare attacked locations or attacked targets to non-attacked similar geographic units or targets could identify characteristics that are unique to the terrorist attacks and bolster counterterrorism efforts.

Scholars should carefully consider which comparison group is most appropriate for their study. Often the decision will hinge upon the specific research question (assessing the effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies, versus whether or not a criminological framework has general applicability), data availability and accessibility, IRB issues, and resources.

### **Comparing individuals convicted of terrorist offences with and without testimony of confidential informants**

The war on drugs led to police dependence on undercover agents and confidential informants; these are now the weapons of choice against domestic terrorism. Evaluation of these tactics is lagging. For terrorism research, the key issue is whether individuals convicted of terrorism offences with the help of informants may be systematically different from individuals convicted without this kind of help.

### ***How the explosion of confidential informants began in the 1980s***

In 1986, Republicans and Democrats were competing to be seen by voters as tough on crime, especially drug crime. The result was the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which scheduled minimum sentences for possessing different amounts of different controlled substances. For instance, a five-year sentence without parole was prescribed for 500 grams of powder cocaine, and for 5 grams of crack cocaine. The prescribed sentence could only be reduced if the Justice Department certified that the offender gave “substantial assistance” to the government in the prosecution of another drug offender.

This exception was designed to encourage low-level offenders to inform on “bigger fish” and in the end to imprison high level drug dealers for long sentences. The law did not work as intended. Most convicted of drug offences were “small fry.” “In a report issued in 1995, the U.S. Sentencing Commission found that only 11% of federal drug trafficking defendants were major traffickers. More than half were low level offenders” (Sterling, 2015).

From 1993 to 1997, federal offenders convicted of drug trafficking numbered about 76,000; about a third (approximately 24,000) had their sentences reduced for informing (Sterling, 2015). Mandatory sentencing thus created a small army of informers, all trying to reduce their own sentences by incriminating others.

Several efforts have been made to regulate law enforcement use of informants. Most recently, Representative Stephen Lynch introduced the Confidential Informant Accountability Act of 2017, but this legislation died in the Judiciary Committee ([www.govinfo.gov](http://www.govinfo.gov), 2022).

### ***Confidential informants in Muslim communities***

The “war on drugs” made law enforcement dependent on informants. After 9/11, the “war on terrorism” continued and extended this dependence.

Three films have been made about the use of confidential informants in developing convictions for Muslim terrorist plots: *T(ERROR)*, *The Newburgh Sting*, and *The Informants*. Journalists have also provided striking examples of how informants seeking money or reduced sentence for their own misdeeds have pulled young Muslims into plans for terrorist attacks; often those convicted are social misfits with mental health problems (Aaronson, 2013; Ali, 2021; German, 2013; Lichtblau, 2016).

Beyond the drumbeat of vivid examples, the strongest effort to provide statistics on use of Muslim informants is a review of 580 U.S. terrorism prosecutions after 9/11 (Norris & Grol-Prokopczyk, 2015). The authors coded each of the cases involving an informant ( $n = 317$ ) for twenty indicators of potential entrapment (a crime that the defendant would have been unlikely or unwilling to commit except for informant’s intervention). Results indicated that perhaps five percent of all defendants in jihadi terrorism cases involving an informant offered a realistic threat of violence. Most defendants, more hapless than dangerous, were convicted of a crime for which the means was supplied by an informant. The informant’s role was particularly obvious in “bomb plots,” given that few defendants had bombmaking skills.

### ***Confidential informants in right-wing groups***

Two recent cases have revealed the proliferation of confidential informants in government proceedings against Right-Wing extremists.

“In court proceedings, the feds have shared the identification numbers of 12 confidential informants involved in Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s kidnapping plot, but refused to provide recruitment methods, payments, locations, and names for all but one” (Andrzejewski, 2021). Two of the men tried for plotting to kidnap Michigan’s governor were acquitted; entrapment arguments related to government informants seem to have been part of the outcome (Smith, 2022).

In September 2021, it was revealed that at least two informant members of the Proud Boys were in contact with their FBI handlers during the breach of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 (Perrett, 2021). There may have been as many as eight FBI informants among the Proud Boys (Feuer & Goldman, 2022). This story is still unfolding, but provides additional evidence of FBI informants deployed among extreme Right-Wing groups.

In short, law enforcement substantially increased use of confidential informants in the 1980s and 1990s, as part of the War on Drugs. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, law enforcement extended use of confidential informants in response to the new threat. Informants have proliferated in both Muslim and Right-Wing communities. The extent to which informants aid or subvert justice and public safety deserves more research attention, as policy makers and public alike begin to see the costs of increasing the use of informants. Bomb plots by Muslims and extreme right wing defendants should be a particular focus of attention; these are most likely to involve entrapment and most likely to alienate affected communities.

Perhaps the most important implication of the proliferation of informants in terrorism cases is the threat to the field’s definition of the problem. Indicted and convicted terrorists are the case data used to study and theorize the terrorist threat. If a sizable proportion of those indicted and convicted for terrorism are more entrapped than dangerous, research will have at best a distorted view of those who are truly dangerous. Our ability to identify the most effective investigative and intervention tools to counter terrorist violence will be similarly distorted.

Testing for this kind of distortion is both simple and urgent. Research must compare offenders convicted with testimony of informants with offenders convicted without such testimony. The research should examine three kinds of terrorists: Jihadist, Right-Wing, and Left-Wing.

### **Avoiding conflation of extremist ideas with extremist violence**

Terrorism is extremely salient and damaging. Not surprisingly, the public, the media and the government are highly motivated to prevent terrorism. This strong motivation, however, is met with another reality of terrorism: it is exceedingly rare. An average American is more likely to win a lottery jackpot or to die of lightning strike than to be killed in a terrorist attack (Mosher & Gould, 2017). Aiming significant efforts at identifying and preventing terrorist plots that are statistically unlikely has contributed to a bias: ignoring the base rate.

The low-base-rate fallacy is a tendency to ignore the general prevalence in favour of individuating information (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). In an iconic study demonstrating the phenomenon, Kahneman and Tversky asked participants to estimate rates of enrolment in nine fields of university studies, including computer science (average estimated enrolment 7%) and humanities (20%) – which comprised the base rates. Participants were then given a description of a student, “Tom W.,” which included: “high intelligence,” “lacking in true creativity,” “has a need for order and clarity,” “his writing is rather dull and mechanical, occasionally enlivened by somewhat corny puns and by flashes of imagination of the sci-fi type” – these comprised the individuating information. Participants were asked to guess in which field of study Tom W. was enrolled. The results demonstrated that participants ignored the base rates, basing all of their judgement (correlation of 98%) on the individuating information as they guessed that Tom W. studied computer science.

In the context of terrorism, the news and public discourse rehashes specific attacks and individual attackers over and over, offering a wealth of individuating information while the reality of the low base rate of these attacks is forgotten.

### ***Exactly how low is the base rate of terrorism?***

One answer comes from repeated representative surveys of U.S. Muslims, which asked their opinions about Jihadi violence and their intentions to commit radical actions (Fajmonova, et al., 2017). About 3% of respondents reported the highest level of radical opinion, justifying suicide bombing of civilians in defence of Islam. Projected onto the population of adult U.S. Muslims, 3% corresponds to about 70,000 people. Out of 70,000 adult U.S. Muslims, only about 100 U.S. Muslims have been indicted on charges related to terrorism – a base rate of 1/7 of 1% (Moskalenko, 2021). The low base rate of jihadi terrorism is sustained when looking outside of the US, where about 3 new global neojihadi terrorists emerge per 100 million people per year (Sageman, 2021).

A similarly low base-rate emerges from studies of other groups with radical ideologies whose members have committed acts of political extremism: QAnon followers number in the tens of millions in the U.S., but fewer than 100 individuals have committed violent acts (Jensen & Kane, 2021; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). Likewise, Incels (“involuntarily celibate”) number in tens of thousands worldwide, yet the total number of violent attacks by Incels is about a dozen (Moskalenko, González, Kates, & Morton, 2022).

### ***Expanding the threat to include extremist ideas***

The low base-rate of terrorism inevitably means that most of those predicted to be at risk for terrorism will never move to violence. Yet money and careers have been poured into finding the needle in a haystack to prevent terrorism. The result of this mismatch between large resources and weak prediction has been to expand the concept of the threat to match the resources: not just violent actors, but anyone who sympathizes with violent actors (“ideological extremists”) are included in our prevention efforts. This much larger group (Sageman, 2021; Moskalenko, 2021) extends our focus far beyond violent action to constitutionally protected (albeit sometimes reprehensible) beliefs.

In February 2015, the White House convened a 3-day Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. The U.S. Government (The White House, 2011) defined violent extremists as

“individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political ends” (p. 1). This definition assumes that terrorist violence is ideologically motivated – bad ideas producing bad behaviour. The definition also conflates support for political violence with committing political violence. Yet consistent evidence indicates that extremist ideas rarely lead to extremist actions (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

Targeting extremist ideas employs large resources but engenders large costs. Directly, these costs are borne by individuals—who are not actually in danger of hurting anyone—targeted by law enforcement, media campaigns, and discrimination based on their beliefs. Worse than being ineffective, these policies create grievances capable of fostering radicalization – a boomerang effect.

Indirectly, public discourse that effectively creates categories of “undesirables” results in fractionation of the society, distrust, and hollowing of democratic values. Expanding the domain of terrorists to include radicals, even radical thinkers, resulted in a perceptual field with multitudes of enemies, both foreign and domestic. This encourages an atmosphere of fear and anger, which chips away at public trust and mental health, pushing especially vulnerable individuals to radicalization.

In short, base rates of terrorism are extremely low. Ignoring the low base rate and expanding the category of terrorist threat from the very few who act violently to the very many who share some characteristics and ideas with them is ineffective and can be counter-productive. Rather than conflate extremist ideas and extremist violence, these must be seen as separate phenomena, requiring separate research attention. It is useful to understand why many Muslim Americans—and many Right-Wing Americans—see the government as a threat; polls and focus groups can help in this regard. Attention to means and opportunity may be more useful for understanding how very few move to political violence than assuming that bad ideas are the problem. As a Brennan Center report concluded: “CVE programs fail because they focus on suppressing ideas, rather than reducing violence” (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019).

### **Focusing on grievance rather than debating definition of ideology**

Terrorism is often linked with ideology, and with narrative. Google Scholar Advanced Search for *terrorism ideology* with years specified as 2000 to 2020, no patents or citations, produces 287,000 to 303,000 hits (depending on order of terms). Similarly specified, *terrorism narrative* produces 158,000 to 173,000 hits. The popularity of ideology and narrative in discussion of terrorism should be surprising given the empirical weakness of these concepts.

### ***Can ideology be a useful explanation of terrorist violence?***

The immediate difficulty is that there is no agreement about the definition of ideology. We consider here two prominent efforts to provide a consensus definition, though neither gets as far as empirical application.

In an immense literature search, Ackerman and Burnham (2019) identified 46 definitions of ideology: 19 general definitions, 6 definitions related to violent extremism, and 21 definitions related to terrorism. Undeterred by the diversity of definitions in the literature, Ackerman and Burnham built a definition of their own: **violent adversarial ideology** is



"an ideology that enunciates specific grievances, delimits enemies, and legitimates violence against those enemies." Ackerman and Burnham's focus on grievances and enemies suggests that a violent adversarial ideology is essentially a perceived grievance. Although they point to the importance of applying their definition to compare extremist ideologies and to map changes in ideology, Ackerman and Burnham do not try to operationalize their definition.

Holbrook and Horgan (2019) recognized three challenges in trying to link ideology with terrorist action. First, many terrorists show little understanding of the ideology supposed to motivate them. Second, terrorist histories often show no evidence that ideology was important in moving the individual to violence. And third, as noted in the previous section, only few of those sharing an ideology ever turn to violence.

Holbrook and Horgan then undertook to enlarge the concept of ideology to respond to these challenges. They offered two directions of enlargement, that is, they stipulated two possible definitions of ideology. First, in a section titled *Grievance-Blame-Response*, Holbrook and Horgan (2019, p. 6) argued that "Concentrating on social dimensions of ideology that emphasize perceptions of collective grievance, common alternatives and a united response, therefore, enhances the utility of the term in its application to terrorism as socio-political violence and harmonizes its usage with other sources of explanation." Again references to collective grievance and united action suggest that terrorist ideology can be understood as a perceived grievance.

Second, in a section titled *Social Fabric*, Holbrook and Horgan (2019, p. 7) suggest that "Ideologies provide a shared sense of belonging and stories that define that community, its heritage and common values." In this view, a melody or song (*nasheed* is their example) can be part of an ideology. At this level of generality, ideology includes all the beliefs, feelings, and rituals of a subculture. For research, the problem is that measures of culture are complex and contested; defining ideology as culture makes it impossible to measure it in any succinct way.

In social science, a stipulated definition succeeds to the extent that it is empirically useful, leading to new measures and new patterns of relationships uncovered with these measures. Holbrook and Horgan do not offer new measures of ideology, and the challenge of designing measures of ideology that can include a *nasheed* is – daunting. Despite occasional calls for developing measures of ideology (Herd & Aldis, 2006), we are not aware of any definition of ideology that has led to a measure of ideology or change in ideology.

### ***Can narrative provide a useful explanation of terrorist violence?***

Like ideology, narrative has been defined in numerous ways. Most definitions have not been tested in empirical research; here we focus on two research programmes that did extend a definition of narrative to enumerate and describe a body of narratives.

In an effort to understand jihadist narratives, Halverson, Corman, and Goodall (2011) distinguish *stories* from *narratives*, and *narratives* from *master narratives*. An example of a story is a report of a successful attack on Western forces by Muhajadeen in Afghanistan. A related series of such stories constitute a narrative of jihadist success.

Here is Corman's thematic summary of jihadist narratives.

The Nakba [loss of Palestine], Crusader [unbelievers attack ummah], and Pharaoh [God drowns pharaoh chasing Moses] master narratives are only three among the 13 we have identified (albeit the most commonly used) . . . Nonetheless, they provide a good picture of the rhetorical vision of Islamist extremists. They see the world as a dangerous place for Islam and Muslims. Enemies stand ready to invade, subjugate, and humiliate, as they have done repeatedly throughout history. They are chipping away at the land promised to Muslims by God. Corrupt leaders collude with the Crusaders and also oppress their people. In many cases the narratives are unresolved, so the situation implicitly cries out for Muslims to come forward as champions to rectify the injustice. This simultaneously allows the extremists to position themselves as the champions, and implies that those on the sidelines should join them. (Corman, 2011)

These themes describe a perceived grievance: Crusaders are invading and Muslims are oppressed by corrupt leaders.

More recently, Braddock and Horgan (2016, p. 382–383) reviewed six different meanings of narrative. Recognizing that the research literature has not provided any consensus, they offered their own definition: “any cohesive and coherent account of events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided.”

Applying the definition of narrative advanced by Braddock and Horgan, Braddock (2015) studied Animal Liberation Front (ALF) narratives, beginning with an ALF website which offered 88 links to what the website referred to as “stories.” Braddock discarded sixteen of these stories as incompatible with Braddock and Horgan’s definition of narrative. For the 72 ALF stories remaining, Braddock developed a list of common themes.

The three most prevalent themes were: the near-human cognitive capacity of animals, victimization of animals, and animal kind-heartedness. Notably, it is the themes that are the focus of attention and discussion, and these themes can be loosely summarized as a kind of grievance: animals are like humans in mind and heart, but are victims of human mistreatment.

Like Corman, Braddock provides themes but no analysis of narrative events, that is “events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided” (Braddock & Horgan, 2016, pp. 382–383)

To sum up, definitions of ideology and narrative are multiple and inconsistent, and seldom lead to empirical measures. Description of extremist ideologies and narratives often amount to descriptions of perceived grievance. Terrorism research should turn away from the complexity and controversy operationalizing definitions of ideology and narrative. For understanding and predicting terrorist violence, the concept of grievance may be more useful.

### **More attention to emotions as a factor in radicalization and terrorism**

Academic discourse about terrorism and radicalization gives substantially more attention to ideology than it does to emotion. Google Scholar search for combined terms “terrorism & ideology” produces 828,000 hits, whereas “terrorism & emotion” returns only 136,000 results – a six-fold difference. A similar disparity emerges when searching scholarly publications for “radicalization & ideology” (77,000 hits) as compared to “radicalization

& emotion" (24,000 hits). In other words, ideology features 3–6 times more frequently than emotion as a factor in radicalization and terrorism.

The difference is baffling, given that most definitions of terrorism postulate an emotion – fear – that terrorists aim to elicit in their target audiences (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020, Chapter 2). In addition to fear, research has demonstrated that, in the aftermath of terrorist violence, the victimized public feels anger (De Castella & McGarty, 2011; Huddy, Smirnov, Snider, & Perliger, 2021); sadness (Harb & Becker, 2018, August; Thoresen, Flood Aakvaag, Wentzel-Larsen, Dyb, & Kristian Hjemdal, 2012); and humiliation (McCauley, 2017). Emotions also play an important part in rallying support for terrorists among those who share their beliefs. Thus, terrorist attacks tend to elicit pride (Jackson, 2022), joy (Hilbrenner, 2015) and *schadenfreude* (Schmid, 2017) among both terrorist sympathizers and terrorist perpetrators.

It seems clear that terrorism is steeped in emotions, from the inception by perpetrators who wish to create fear and themselves experience anger and pride, to the reactions of victims who feel fear, anger, sadness and humiliation, to the vicarious emotions by the terrorists' sympathizers, who experience pride, joy and *schadenfreude* at the news of successful attacks. Indeed, in terrorist case histories, a radical ideology often comes second to a strong emotional commitment made to a loved one involved with terrorism—as it did in the radicalization of the younger Boston Marathon bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020; Chapter 3); or to a group which offered companionship at a tough time—the “bunch of guys” radicalization pathway of the 9/11 bombers (Sageman, 2004); or to a craving for status and thrill that can come from the use of violence, weapons and explosives—the pathway of the Butcher of Baghdad, Abu Moussa al Zarqawi (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2016, Chapter 6). With emotions often preceding ideology in terrorists' radicalization trajectory, the emotional underpinnings of radicalization should be a priority for terrorism studies.

Not only do terrorists themselves act out of emotions, but they intend to move other people to emotion-driven actions. Among their sympathizers, terrorists hope to affect donations and volunteers by successful attacks. Among their victims, terrorists hope to see emotional over-reactions that would cripple their economy and encourage them into draining military engagements (jiu-jitsu politics, McCleskey et al., 2007,). Understanding emotional reactions to the acts of terrorism, both among victims and among terrorist sympathizers, is key to being able to foster broad resilience to terrorism, as well as to undermine support for terrorism.

Why, then, don't emotions get more attention from terrorism researchers? We propose three hypotheses below, including professional training of terrorist researchers; cultural norms prescribing control of emotions, and moral contagion.

### ***Professional training***

Emotions are not studied in most disciplines represented in terrorism research: political science; international relations; criminology; sociology. Even in psychology, emotions are not taught in most undergraduate courses. As a result, most scholars in the field of terrorism research are not trained to theorize about emotions or to study them empirically. Instead, they are trained to work with rational choice models, which do not deny that emotions exist but deny that emotions have causal influence on behaviour. Rational

choice models cannot easily take account of emotions (Kaufmann, 2005), which are difficult to measure in comparison with the material factors that are the focus of rational choice models.

### ***Social norms emphasizing emotional control***

Socially and culturally, Westerners tend to see emotions as something to be controlled (Miyamoto & Petermann, 2014), something appropriate to children (Joy & Mathew, 2018,) and women (Fischbach, et al., 2015). Adults and professionals are expected to rise above emotions (Kramer & Hess, 2002) to learn to make rational choices (Elster, 2010). Those who rise to the ranks of prominent scholars or government officials have spent most of their careers working hard to overcome the power of emotions in themselves. This creates a kind of blindness to the power of emotions in others, leading scholars and officials to discount or devalue the emotional factor in terrorists' motivations.

### ***Avoiding moral contagion***

Adding emotions to the list of factors directing enemy action leads to an uncomfortable reminder. All humans share roughly the same repertoire of emotions (Ekman, 1992). Focus on emotions thus highlights a commonality between terrorists and us, making "them" a lot more like "us" than we might prefer. (Notice that focusing on ideology does not create the same conundrum, as it is easy to ideologically differentiate between "us" and "them" – the terrorists.)

People tend to react to moral transgressions in the same way we react to physically disgusting things – rotting food and body products—with the same impulse to avoid morally repugnant individuals and everything associated with them (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997). We like to keep away from those we consider immoral – and terrorists certainly fall into that category. To avoid moral contamination, the natural impulse is to keep a healthy distance from these people, including psychological distance. Entertaining ideas about similarities between us and them is too close for comfort.

What's more, focusing on emotions in explaining terrorists' behaviour opens the door to considering emotional motivation in our own behaviour, including which counter-terrorism policies we support. To contemplate some of our own actions as less than perfectly logical and reasonable, to see them as possibly driven by our own fear, anger, humiliation – is to concede that we might be doing something counter-effective, making ourselves less safe instead of more secure. There is a natural human resistance to this realization, fortified by considerations of political careers, government money spent, and cultural narratives upheld. Unfortunately, this inclination can stand in the way of gaining insights into radicalization and terrorism.

As already suggested, research on emotions can take at least three directions. First, terrorists are moved by emotions, and these deserve as much attention as terrorist choices of tactics and strategies. Second, terrorists' targets – leaders, victims, and victim sympathizers—are moved by emotions, and these deserve as much attention as the terrorists' emotions. In particular, the emotions that lead to over-reaction to terrorist attack must be understood in order to avoid the jujitsu politics that can make reaction to terrorist attack more dangerous than the terrorists. Third, terrorist sympathizers are

moved by emotions, and these deserve as much attention as the emotions of terrorist targets. The war of ideas is a political competition; so is the war of emotions that includes terrorists, their targets, and their sympathizers.

## **Conclusion**

This paper considers developments in American and British terrorism research over the past 20 years to identify opportunities for growth and improvement. These include 1) Interview methods; 2) Database sourcing; 3) Comparison groups; 4) Data implications of cases involving confidential informants (CI); 5) Base-rate considerations; 6) Ideology and narrative vs. grievance; 7) Emotions of terrorists and their targets.

## ***Interviews***

Terrorist interviews often take place in a brief period of days, try to cover a long period in the respondent's life, and this period is far in the past. To increase reliability, interviews should be repeated over time, focused on shorter periods, and corroborated by interviewing family, peers, or teachers, or by comparing with school or government records. Additionally, attention to the stimulus value of the interviewer (how and why was the interview agreed to, and what might the interviewee surmise about the goals or biases of the interviewer) might be useful, as well as reporting of the tone and facial expressions of the interviewee.

Some limitations of terrorist interviews seem relatively intractable. Interviewees are a convenience sample that cannot easily be generalized to any larger population of terrorists. Nevertheless, interviews that include survey questions drawn from polling research can connect qualitative results with quantitative results from more representative samples.

## ***Data-bases***

To measure and account for biases in database research, using and comparing as many sources as possible is the first and obvious tack. Recording the number of sources for each data-base case can allow comparison of results for more and less reliable data. Testing for differences in case patterns over time can be useful, especially given the decline in resources for news reporting as print publications lose income to online news.

For terrorism cases, court proceedings that include multiple sworn and cross-examined witnesses may provide the closest to a gold standard for determining the facts of a terrorism case. To the extent that court or police records become available for even a few cases in a terrorism data base, comparison of court records with data-base records can be revealing.

## ***Comparison groups***

Terrorism research has begun to follow criminology in comparing different kinds of offenders: terrorists to non-political killers, far-right to far-left to jihadi terrorists, loner to group-affiliated terrorists. Still largely missing, however, is comparison of terrorists with

non-offenders such as community samples or polling respondents. Particularly rare and useful is comparison of terrorists with non-criminal activists for the same cause.

### ***Confidential informants***

Use of criminal informants can bias the population of those convicted of terrorism offences, if those convicted by informant testimony are less dangerous than those convicted of self-initiated offences. Individuals convicted of terrorism offences are likely to show up in terrorism data-bases, leaving the possibility that data-base cases are not representative of the origins of terrorist violence. Research is needed to compare terrorist cases—jihadist, Right Wing, and Left-Wing—that do and do not depend on an informant.

### ***Base rates***

Terrorism is exceedingly rare, even among those who share extremists' ideology: the base rate of violent action among terrorist supporters hovers below 1%. Expanding the conceptualization of terrorist threat from the terrorists to "violent extremists" multiplies perceived threat, misdirects resources, and can undermine effectiveness of research and prevention efforts. Keeping the low base rates of terrorism in perspective means highlighting the distinction between radical ideas and radical actions in terrorism research and CVE practice.

### ***Ideology and narrative***

Radical ideology and terrorists' narratives are often referenced in terrorism research. However, neither concept is well-defined, and neither can be easily measured. This makes empirical studies of ideology and narrative inconsistent rather than cumulative. Ideology and narrative should be left behind in favour of emphasizing factors such as grievances, collective action frames, and emotions.

### ***Emotions***

Research on the emotional underpinnings of terrorism lags behind the study of terrorists' cognitions: ideology and narrative. This imbalance can be addressed by directing research efforts towards studying emotions, including emotions that fuel movement to political violence, emotions of terrorists' sympathizers that motivate sympathy and support for terrorist groups, and emotions of terrorists' intended victims that are important for understanding the trajectory of conflict between state and terrorists.

We began this paper by recognizing the impressive growth and development of terrorism studies in the twenty years since the 9/11 attacks. We believe this development is now strong enough to support growth in the directions identified in this paper, which together amount to raised standards for both methods and concepts in terrorism research. The next twenty years can do more than redouble our current understanding of how individuals and groups turn to political violence.

## Note

1. It should be noted that recent terrorism studies in South and Southeast Asia have innovatively interviewed current members of terrorist groups (see for e.g., Azca et al., 2019; Chernov Hwang, 2017).

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