The Study of Terrorism: A New Approach

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The study of political terrorism is today one of the fastest growing areas of academic research in the world, producing literally thousands of new publications annually, as well as new study programmes, research projects, PhD theses, research institutes, think-tanks, conferences, and other academic activities. As a sub-field of academic research, the study of terrorism has its origins in the late 1960s. However, it was the events of 11 September 2001, followed by the terrorist attacks in Bali, Madrid and London that really galvanised the contemporary study of political terrorism and animated a whole new generation of scholars.

Along with its growth, it has emerged as a politically important field of research because a number of terrorism scholars have direct and regular access to policymakers and their research informs the way in which governments formulate counter-terrorism policies.

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As reviews have consistently shown over the years, however, the terrorism studies field is beset with a number of problems and challenges. Firstly, there has been a failure within the field to develop rigorous theories or even to agree on a definition or set of identifying criteria for the field’s primary concept. There are currently over two hundred different definitions of ‘terrorism’ used in the literature, and many more used by different governments. Clearly, it is a challenge to produce reliable research when there is no agreement on the nature of the subject being studied.

Secondly, terrorism is treated by many scholars as an objective, stable phenomenon that can be easily studied using traditional social scientific methods, rather than an ideologically loaded and controversial term which depends on the perspectives of the researcher.

Third, there has been a noticeable over-reliance on secondary sources and a frequent failure to undertake primary research in terrorism research, particularly in terms of face-to-face engagement with individuals and groups named as ‘terrorists’. The fact is the vast majority of ‘terrorism experts’ have never met a terrorist or conducted research among groups who support violent struggle. Further, a great many terrorism scholars rely on official sources of information about terrorism without questioning whether they are being fed propaganda designed to advance a particular political agenda.

Fourth, there is a failure to appreciate the cultural-ideological biases inherent to Western academic and political discourses of terrorism, and the way it tends to follow the priorities of governments. This has led some commentators to describe much Western terrorism research as ‘counter-insurgency masquerading as political science’. In other words, the field sometimes functions as a direct source of support for state counter-terrorism efforts.

Fifth, there is in the literature a restricted set of specific research topics that scholars tend to study. Most studies focus on non-state forms of terrorism and ignore state terrorism, for example, and today a great deal of research is focused on so-called ‘Islamic’ or ‘Islamist terrorism’. Finally, the field is characterised by a large number of new scholars who lack adequate grounding in the extensive existing literature on...
the wider study of political violence and social movements, and who tend to treat the current terrorist threat facing certain Western states as unprecedented, highly threatening and exceptional.

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Moreover, some critically-minded scholars argue that the field must face up to a number of specific political and normative problems. For example, it is a fact that there is in much contemporary terrorism research a strong ideological bias, including a tendency to focus on groups and states with which Western states are currently opposed to, and a tendency to prioritise research topics tailored to the demands of policy-makers for practically useful knowledge in the fight against terrorism. At the same time, there is a simultaneous failure to study the terrorism practiced by Western states and their allies, or the political violence experienced in the developing world.

Much of the terrorism research also tends to reinforce and reproduce (rather than challenge) many of the dominant myths about terrorism put forward by the state and the popular media, including the myths that terrorism poses a major threat to international security, that terrorism is caused by religious extremism, and that terrorists are mentally unstable. Many terrorism scholars also fail to appreciate and reflect upon the politics of labelling in regards to ‘terrorism’ or to consider the real-world consequences of terrorism research for particular communities and individuals. Conducting terrorism research on Muslim communities, for example, can reinforce the notion of Muslims as a ‘suspect community’ in the mind of politicians and the wider public, which then has serious social consequences for individuals in that community.

It is in this context that I and a growing number of colleagues have argued that we need a distinctly ‘critical’ approach to the study of terrorism, as a way of overcoming many of these weaknesses and challenges in the traditional field. What we have called ‘critical terrorism studies’ (CTS) has been discussed in detail elsewhere, especially our new book entitled Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda. Some its main commitments and attitudes are as follows. 

First, we believe that terrorism researchers need to maintain an acute sensitivity to the politics of labelling and take extreme care in using the term during any research. Simply following this rule would, we believe, alleviate a great many problems with contemporary terrorism research. Second, we argue that there must be an acceptance that ‘terrorism’ is primarily a label for certain kinds of political violence, and not a hard fact or an objective phenomenon. This means that who or what counts as ‘terrorism’ can change over time and place according to political and cultural perspectives. A former ‘terrorist’ such as Nelson Mandela, for example, can later go on to become a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Third, we believe terrorism scholars need to make a strong commitment to transparency regarding their values and political standpoints, particularly as they relate to the geo-political interests and values of the states they work in. This means recognising that terrorism research does not occur in a vacuum, nor can it be conducted completely objectively. Rather, it is always deeply embedded within the politics and struggles of its own society. Fourth, we believe that terrorism researchers should be willing to expand the focus of their research to include topics often ignored by scholars, such as the use of terrorism by states, gender dimensions of terrorism, the impact of counter-terrorism on communities, historical lessons of previous terrorism campaigns, and the political reasons which drive violence – among others. Fifth, we argue for scholarly adherence to a set of responsible research ethics which take account of the various users of terrorism research, including the ‘suspect
communities’ from which terrorists often emerge and the populations who bear the brunt of counter-terrorism policies. Related to this, we believe in the value of primary research, especially in terms of being willing to ‘talk to terrorists’ and their supporters to discover what they are struggling for or against. Finally, we are committed to the promotion of normative values and the improvement of human security over the prioritisation of narrow ideas of national security.

We believe that these kinds of commitments make CTS very different from most traditional approaches to the study of terrorism, and they go beyond the simple call for better research. They are also crucial for trying to influence policymakers into taking a more responsible approach to devising counter-terrorism policies.

The call for the establishment of a new more ‘critical’ kind of terrorism studies is a self-conscious and deliberate attempt to try and overcome some of the problems that have been noted about the broader field of terrorism studies, and to attract scholars who study terrorism but are uncomfortable associating with a field that has historically been closely aligned with the state. In addition to our new book, *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, we have also initiated a number of other important activities. First, we have convened a new Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) within the British International Studies Association (BISA).5 The intention of the working group is to establish an international network of critically-oriented terrorism scholars, to generate and coordinate new kinds of research activities, and to organise papers and panels for conferences. In terms of teaching, a number of openly ‘critical’ terrorism studies modules and programmes have been established at Aberystwyth University, the University of Kent at Canterbury, the University of Manchester, and elsewhere.

Perhaps most importantly, in early 2007 we launched a new peer-reviewed academic journal entitled *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.6 The aim of the journal is to provide a focal point for the publication of explicitly ‘critical’ research on terrorism, to provide a forum in which critical and orthodox accounts of terrorism can engage in respectful debate, and to review and influence developments in the wider field of research.

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In conclusion, we believe that the arrival of critical terrorism studies heralds an exciting new era in terrorism research which opens up the possibility for new kinds of approaches and questions to this controversial subject. A crucial remaining question however, is whether the growing plurality of perspectives within the field will be reflected in the kinds of advice given to counter-terrorism policymakers. Will they listen to the new insights provided by critically-oriented scholars or will they continue to rely on experts and scholars wedded to the traditional field? The outcome could be critical to the future stability of societies affected by political violence.

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ENDNOTES

Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda

Since the 9/11 attacks, the study of terrorism has been mushrooming, such that it is today one of the fastest expanding areas of research in the Western academic world. Critical Terrorism Studies examines some of the shortcomings and limitations of orthodox terrorism studies, while offering alternative approaches to the study. Contributors from a variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives give this book diversity, and lay the foundations for, and provoke debate about, the future research agenda of this new field.

Critical Terrorism Studies is edited by Professor Richard Jackson, Dr Marie Breen-Smyth and Jeroen Gunning. The book is an invaluable contribution to the subject, which The Cordoba Foundation commends.

Available in all good bookshops