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## Topics in terrorism research: reviewing trends and gaps, 2007-2016

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### ABSTRACT

The topical focus of research on terrorism has frequently been critiqued for being too narrow, too event-driven and too strongly tied to governments' counterterrorism policies. This article uses keyword analysis to assess the degree to which these issues remain present in the literature on terrorism as represented by the 3,442 articles published between 2007 and 2016 in nine of the field's leading academic journals. Several fluctuations notwithstanding, research on terrorism has retained a strong focus on al-Qaeda, jihadist terrorism more generally, and the geographic areas most strongly associated with this type of terrorist violence. Results also indicate that the field remains event-driven and consistently underemphasizes state terrorism as well as non-jihadist terrorism, such as that perpetrated by right-wing extremists.

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## Introduction

Research on terrorism has a rich tradition of self-criticism. Scathing assessments of the field appeared as early as the 1980s, with scholars calling it "impressionistic, anecdotal, superficial and (...) pretentious" (Schmid 1982, 418) and cautioning against its "ahistorical or alarmist" tendencies (Crenshaw 1986, 381). Such inward-looking assessments continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s and did little to change this pessimistic outlook. Reich (1990) was wary of overgeneralizations and simplistic explanations, while Mockaitis (2003, 211) damningly wrote of "persistent stereotypes, glib generalizations, and inaccurate assumptions about Islam and the Arab world [in] even the best terrorism research". In a ground-breaking series of contributions, Silke (2001, 2004b, 2007, 2008, 2009) fed this debate with quantitative data and revealed a worrying overreliance on secondary sources, the predominance of exclusively literature-review based methods, and a research community characterized by a lack of collaboration and one-time contributors. Such criticisms arguably peaked when Sageman (2014) declared the field to be in "stagnation".

The majority of this criticism has focused on methodological issues, such as the scarcity of primary sources and the limited range of data-gathering techniques being employed. What has received much less attention, particularly in recent years, are the topics being investigated and by extension, those that are understudied or overlooked.

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Scholars like Gunning (2007a), Jackson (2012a) and Ranstorp (2007) have argued that terrorism research is too event-driven and too strongly tied to states' interests in developing more effective policies to counter the latest threat. This has served to prioritize particular subjects, even though the degree to which they actually pose a threat is debatable (Mueller 2005), while others, such as state-terrorism or right-wing extremist violence, are by this same logic left un- or under-examined. Indeed, such a limited thematic focus was one of the reasons for the creation of *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (Smyth et al. 2008). Recent work by Schuurman (2018) found that the field has made considerable progress over the past decade in addressing the longstanding over-reliance on secondary sources. Has a similar improvement allowed research on terrorism to broaden its focus beyond the immediacy of the latest threat?

This article provides an overview of the main subjects of research on terrorism in the decade between 2007 and 2016, as published in the field's nine leading scholarly journals. It does so on the basis of a purpose-built database containing all of the 3,442 articles published in these journals over the ten-year period. Keyword analysis is employed to assess which subjects have received the most attention and how that focus has shifted over time. Although a standalone piece of research, this paper is part of a larger project on the state of terrorism research and is the companion piece to an article that delves into the field's methodological development over these same ten years (Schuurman 2018). To maximize transparency, the dataset used for both papers is available for download on an open-access basis.<sup>1</sup>

The present paper's value lies not just in the overview it provides of the field's development in terms of topical focus. Ascertaining whether biases still exist with regard to the subjects being studied, and understanding which gaps they leave, is essential for ongoing efforts to improve the study of terrorism and political violence more broadly. The results are also highly relevant for the policy and practice of preventing or countering terrorism, as a blinkered perception of the terrorist threat landscape can (and has) led to biased perceptions of that threat, which not only hurts preventative efforts but can also exacerbate societal tensions by stigmatizing particular groups. There is additional relevance in the discussion of what these findings have to say about the degree to which research on terrorism is still driven by the latest attack and tied to government-influenced funding calls, or whether it has managed to develop a more independent research agenda that stems from the interests of the community of scholars itself.

## Counterterrorism by other means?

Quoting a respondent, Schmid and Jongman (1988, 182) argued that much research on terrorism was essentially "counterinsurgency masquerading as political science". To Schmid and Jongman, a researcher's primary task is to be a "student of combustion" rather than a "firefighter". Yet, as for instance Silke (2019b) attests, many terrorism researchers have continued to view their role principally as counterterrorism by other means, in the process tying research topics and questions closely to government priorities in those areas. A relationship that is promulgated in part because states are among the principal funders of research on terrorism (Silke 2004a). Critiques of such "state centrism" in terrorism research have been at the heart of critical-theory based approaches to the subject (Blakeley 2007; Cox 1981; Gunning 2007a, 2007b; Heath-Kelly

2010; Jarvis 2009; Stokes 2009). These criticisms were more recently echoed at the 2018 *Society for Terrorism Research* conference, where a panel on radicalization research lamented the field's inability to advance its own "bottom-up" research agenda (Marsden et al. 2018). Arguably, however, the problem lies not so much in the counterterrorism-focus of much research on terrorism, but in the rather narrow orientation that follows from it.

An overemphasis on the terrorist threats right before us, a view often further truncated by what governments believe to be the most pressing issues, does more than limit the scope of academic inquiry. A narrow focus on the immediate can lead to disregard for threats or developments just over the horizon, or those just out of sight. The inability to prevent the 9/11 attacks has famously been blamed in part on a failure to imagine such an attack from occurring (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States 2004). Moreover, while some (government) analysts certainly were aware of the growing danger posed by al-Qaeda, researchers' interests were largely elsewhere (Czwaro 2006). In the top-10 most researched terrorist groups during the 1990s, Hezbollah was the only group that might be considered a largely religiously-inspired one, although the applicability of that label is a contentious one (Gunning and Jackson 2011). The PIRA, U.S. militias, Branch Davidians and Northern Irish Loyalists constituted the top-3, with the last two sharing third place (Silke 2004b). Given the extent to which 9/11 and the "war on terror" that followed redefined Western perceptions of terrorism as virtually synonymous with al-Qaeda and jihadism, the 1990's preoccupation with Northern Ireland seems almost anachronistic.

Looking beyond the immediate is not only important to avoiding the tunnel vision that can leave developments in the terrorist threat underappreciated until it is too late. As De Goede (2008) has argued, our conceptualizations of potential future threats are strongly rooted in our current preoccupations and biases. Any blind spots are thus likely to be carried over into these imaginings of future developments. Given that future-threat assessments can have distinct consequences in terms of counterterrorism policy development, the repercussions of what we are (not) currently imagining are likely to reach far beyond the confines of government white papers or academic articles (See also Jackson 2009). Indeed, as De Goede argues, the exercise of looking ahead should itself be critically assessed and debated (See also Heath-Kelly 2012). Gaining an understanding of how terrorism research has developed in terms of the subjects under investigation is thus an important part of maintaining a critical perspective on the production of knowledge on a controversial subject.

How terrorism is conceptualized and fought is also highly relevant from a societal perspective, as it impacts the daily lives of thousands of people across the globe. What we study under the rubric of terrorism and what we leave out of our analyses matters. For instance, is it justifiable that the debate in the United States is principally about the threat of international jihadist terrorism while right-wing terrorism remains understudied, and underreported in the media (Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux 2019), despite having become more prevalent in terms of attacks launched in the post-2010 period (Miller 2017).<sup>2</sup> None of this is to argue that scholars should no longer work with government-based funders or that they should stop pursuing counterterrorism-policy relevance in their work. But it is important to strive for a balanced research agenda that is broad in its

focus, not tied solely to the latest threat and free to imagine and research both potential future threats and the shortcomings of contemporary policy.

While the subject has not received as much attention as the methodological and conceptual problems besetting the field, the academic community has long been aware of the dangers of tunnel visioning on particular subjects (Horgan and Boyle 2008). Silke (2007) noted that 9/11 had led to a much stronger focus on al-Qaeda in particular and Islamist terrorism in general, which became the topic of 57.3% of studies, as opposed to 23.3% in the years before 9/11. Simultaneously, research on suicide terrorism and the potential for terrorists to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) also rose to prominence (See also Ranstorp 2007). Although Silke (2009) found that these topics lost some popularity as the early 2000s wore on, they remained the most frequently researched subjects in the core terrorism journals.

Writing in 2012, Jackson reiterated the overemphasis on al-Qaeda, jihadism more generally, WMDs, and the ubiquitous but poorly-understood concept of “radicalization” (See also Jackson 2012b; Schuurman and Taylor 2018). Authors have also increasingly begun to demonstrate and criticize the relative paucity of academic research on (and policymakers’ attention for) the threat of right-wing extremism and terrorism (Freilich et al. 2018; Koehler 2016; Manz 2018; Michael 2019; Perry and Scrivens 2016; Piazza 2017; Weinberg 2013). Another topic that has been particularly noted for its absence, especially so by scholars drawn to *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, is state terrorism (Dixit and Stump 2011; Silke 2019a). One result of the field’s state-centrism, that is the alleged tendency of many terrorism researchers to mirror in their analyses those forms of terrorism that states see as problematic, has been that research on terrorism has become virtually synonymous with research on *non-state* terrorism (George 1991; Gunning 2007b; Jackson 2008; Sheehan 2012; Toros and Gunning 2009).

Meanwhile, historical approaches, terrorism by states, empirical evaluations of counterterrorism measures and terrorism in the global south remained understudied (see also Duyvesteyn, 2007). Schmid (2011a) and particularly Schmid and Forest (2018) have helped maintain interest for un- and understudied topics by compiling detailed lists of subjects deserving more attention, based in part on feedback they received from other terrorism scholars. Outside of these intentionally reflective pieces, the call for more attention to particular subjects is also frequently found. Examples range far and wide, including cyberterrorism capabilities (Beggs and Warren 2009), police officers’ perceptions of Muslim community organisations (Spalek and Lambert 2008), the impact of terrorism on consumer behaviour (Mahardika, French, and Sembada 2018), the role of women in jihad (Cook 2005; De Leede 2018), online Islamophobia (Awan 2014) and terrorist financing in virtual environments (Irwin and Choo 2012).

In short, the study of terrorism as it has taken place over the past several decades has revealed topical preferences, or less kindly biases, that have shaped the field and contributed to broader societal imaginings of what terrorism is and is not. What we study clearly matters, but the last systematic assessment of the topical focus of terrorism research stems from Silke’s 2009 work. In that chapter, Silke looked at research conducted between 1990 and 2007. What has happened since that time? That question is at the heart of this article, which looks at how the field of terrorism studies has developed in terms of thematic focus in the decade following 2007. Do old criticisms still hold true, or has the field adopted a broader research agenda?

## Research design and data-collection

This article stems from a research project that systematically assessed the state of terrorism research by constructing a dataset on all research carried out in the nine main academic journals between 2007 and 2016. Strongly inspired by Silke's earlier work, this dataset coded the 3442 articles published in these ten years according to whether they utilized any primary data, what data-collection method was used, and whether any statistical analyses were conducted. Each article was also coded for its type (e.g., was it a research article, a research note, a book review, etcetera), was linked to its respective authors, and included all known keywords. Unfortunately, not all articles include specific keywords. In such cases, the author and the coders who assisted him formulated these themselves based on the title and abstract of the paper.

When Silke last looked at the field of terrorism studies, the main academic journals were *Terrorism and Political Violence* (TPV) and *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (SCT). Since 2007, however, these two mainstays have been joined by seven new journals dedicated to research on terrorism. These are *Perspectives on Terrorism* (POT, 2007-present), the *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* (SNT, 2007-present), *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (CST, 2008-present), *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways Toward Terrorism and Genocide* (DAC, 2008-present), *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (BSTPA, 2009-present), *Journal of Terrorism Research* (JTR, 2011–April 2018) and the *Journal for Deradicalization* (JDR, 2014–present). By including these seven new journals in the dataset, the research on which this article is based is able to generate not only a much more recent but also a much broader assessment of the field than has been hitherto possible.

The data collection process began in late 2015 and was completed in September 2017. It was conducted using Microsoft Access. The majority of information recorded in this dataset was collected by the author. Over the course of the two-year project, six research assistants and interns lent their valuable support to the data collection process. To ensure similar coding practices and accuracy, the assistants' work was checked by the author during regularly held meetings, by recoding random samples, and by asking them to document any questions or uncertainties in a "comments" field specifically included in the database design for this purpose. When the data collection process had been finalized, information was drawn from the dataset using Access "queries" and subsequently imported into Microsoft Excel so that this information could be made insightful through the application of straightforward descriptive statistics, such as the top-10 most-used keywords per year.

Although the dataset includes 3442 articles, this number includes non-research related pieces such as editorial news, retraction notices, conference agenda's, and book reviews. To attain a research-related thematic overview, only "research articles", "research notes" and "other resources", a category containing contributions such as interview transcripts, were selected for keyword analysis. This yielded 2.552 articles in total. Whereas most journals require their authors to provide a number of keywords alongside the abstract, SCT does not. Instead, the author included his own set of keywords for SCT articles based upon their titles and abstracts. Ultimately this led to a total of 11.295 keywords being compiled. These were ordered according to publication year and from this overview subsets were drawn in Excel to provide overviews of the literature focus in terms of geographic region and terrorist groups or individuals.

## Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that need to be acknowledged in order to set the results in the necessary context. First of all, although the 3,552 articles included in the dataset make it the largest collection of information on the field of terrorism research known to the author, it is not all-encompassing. There are many more outlets for research on terrorism than the nine academic journals surveyed here. Much work appears in books, edited volumes, and in reports published by think tanks. Furthermore, as Silke and Schmidt-Petersen (2017) have demonstrated, many of the most-cited articles on terrorism do not even appear in the field's core journals at all. Nevertheless, by focusing data collection on nine established and newly-formed academic journals on terrorism research over a ten-year period, this study has been able to provide a meta-analysis of the field's development in hitherto unseen breadth and detail.

A second point to be acknowledged is that key-word analysis as used here has several potential drawbacks. By relying on the list of all keywords used in a particular year, the relative weight of a particular topic may be influenced by authors who use similar keywords to highlight one topic, such as "al-Qaeda", "Osama bin-Laden" and "Jihadism". But because this potential issue applies to all articles analysed here, the overall picture is still expected to be a faithful representation of thematic focus. Another potential set of issues is that authors may not have formulated a keyword for the most obvious parts of their topic, or that the thematic focus of those authors writing in SCT, who did not formulate any keywords whatsoever, was incorrectly represented by the keywords assigned to those articles by the present author. Such errors cannot be ruled out, but by relying on 2,552 research-related articles and the 11,295 keywords associated with them, the sample is large enough to accommodate them without significantly affecting overall outcomes.

A final point relates to definitional issues. The difficulties of defining what terrorism is and how it relates to similar forms of violence such as insurgency, are well known (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton 2009; Neumann and Smith 2008; Schmid 2011b). But another definitional challenge particular to this study was attributing one overarching ideological current to a radical, extremist, or terrorist group. In many instances, groups do not fit neatly into one such category and even the categories themselves (e.g. is there such a thing as purely "religious" terrorism?) are subject to debate (Gunning and Jackson 2011; Schmid 2013). Whereas it is quite straightforward in some cases, al-Qaeda being quite clearly a jihadist organization, for example, the exercise becomes more difficult in others. Was the IRA and its various offshoots a left-wing extremist organization or principally one focused on a nationalist agenda? Is anti-abortion terrorism as it occurred in the United States best classified as single-issue, or are groups like the Army of God more accurately typified as belonging to the right-wing extremist movement? These categorizations certainly matter and different interpretations are likely to yield a slightly different set of outcomes.

## Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the top-5 most frequently used keywords per year for all of the 2,552 research-based articles in the dataset. Where two or more keywords were used with the same frequency, all were included. For example, in 2007 "al-Qaeda" and "jihadism" shared first-place with both being encountered in 5% of the research articles

**Table 1.** Five most-used keywords per year.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
al-Qaeda	5,00%	5,2%	2,9%	4,2%	4,4%	2,8%	2,2%	1,8%	1,5%	1,7%
Jihadism	5,00%	3,2%	2,9%	3,5%	2,2%	2,4%	2,8%	3,8%	4,3%	2,9%
Iraq	2,62%	4,8%	4,3%	3,4%	2,9%	1,9%	3,2%	2,5%	5,4%	4,3%
Suicide terrorism	1,90%									
Islam(ism)	1,90%									
United States	1,90%		1,6%		1,6%					
CT/WOT	1,67%	2,0%					1,8%			
revolution	1,43%									
Uganda	1,43%									
Afghanistan		2,2%	1,9%	2,0%		1,4%				
Insurgency			1,7%							
Pakistan				2,9%	1,7%					
Internet						1,5%				
Syria						1,5%	3,41%	2,29%		
Lone-actors								1,53%		
Foreign fighters									1,5%	
Islamic State									4,4%	5,3%
Radicalization									1,9%	2,0%

surveyed. Another point to note is that this top-5 reflects thematically grouped keywords. For instance, “al-Qaeda” also includes affiliates such as “al-Qaeda in Iraq” or “AQAP” as well as references to “Osama bin-Laden”, “jihadism” also includes “homegrown jihadism”, “global jihad”, etcetera. This was done to provide a more complete overview of the frequency with which a particular topic or theme was encountered in the literature.

The results presented in Table 1 clearly show that al-Qaeda, jihadism more generally and Iraq were the most frequently researched topics overall in the 2007–2016 period. Several other topics, such as “United States”, “Counterterrorism/War on Terror” and “Afghanistan” were also frequent top-5 contenders. Unsurprisingly, the Syrian conflict and the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) came to occupy a great deal of researchers’ attention from 2014 onwards. Some other “hot topics”, such as lone-actor terrorism, the foreign fighter phenomenon, the Internet, and radicalization also drew considerable interest, albeit for relatively short periods of time lasting no more than one or two years.

While interest in al-Qaeda and its affiliates has remained significant in all the years between 2007 and 2016, it has declined from roughly 5% in 2007 and 2008 to around 1,7% in 2016. Not because jihadism as a broader topic of investigation has become less popular, but in all likelihood because al-Qaeda has been overshadowed by IS as the most important representation of Salafi-Jihadism. On a related point, it is apparent that interest in the Syrian conflict peaked between 2011 and 2014, but was eclipsed by a focus on Iraq from 2015 onwards. Finally, these keywords represent anywhere between 12% and 23% of the total number of keywords used within research-focused articles. While jihadism-related topics remained at the forefront of the terrorism research community’s interests, the fact that these constituted a minority of the total number used raises the possibility that beyond this top-5 may lie research with a much broader thematic scope.

To acquire this broader perspective on the subjects being studied, all groups and individuals engaged in terrorism or operating on radical or extremist ideological underpinnings (see definitions provided by Schmid 2013), were drawn from the keyword list. This produced a subset of 237 keywords. Dividing these into broad ideological categories provides insight into the types of groups and individuals that researchers have

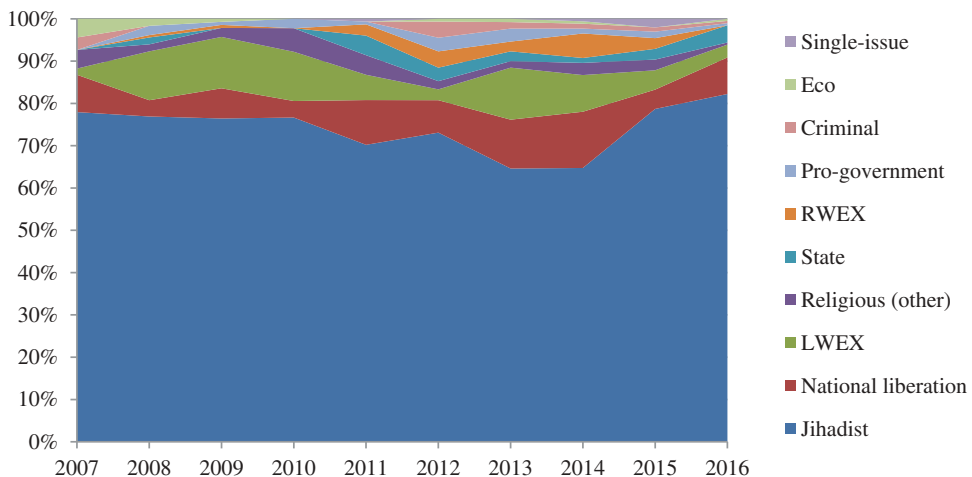
**Table 2.** Groups and individuals by ideology.

Jihadist	74,5%
National liberation	7,8%
LWEX	7,6%
Religious (other)	2,7%
State terrorism	2,1%
RWEX	1,9%
Pro-government	1,6%
Criminal	1,0%
Eco	0,7%
Single-issue	0,4%

focused their attention on. Presented in [Table 2](#), these results indicate that the field's focus on jihadist terrorism is actually much stronger than the top-5 most frequently-used keywords reveals. As measured by keyword usage, 74,5% of all articles focus on jihadist groups such as IS, Hamas, and al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Trailing far behind at 7,8% are groups and individuals with a focus on national liberation or regional autonomy, such as ETA, the various incarnations of the IRA, the Palestinian Fatah movement and the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), which was active in the 1960s. Left-wing extremists are next, and include 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian anarchists such as Vera Zasulich, as well as more contemporary organisations like the German Baader-Meinhof group.

Equally revealing are what these numbers say about the least-researched types of groups and individuals. At under three percent, non-jihadist religious groups such as the Branch Davidians are infrequently encountered in the literature. Even less attention is given to state terrorism, right-wing extremist terrorism, and pro-government militias and terrorists such as Iranian groups in Iraq or Unionist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. But the least-researched types of (terrorist) violence are those associated with criminal groups, such as Mexico's drug cartels, animal rights and environmental-activism, and single-issue concerns such as the violent fringes of the anti-abortion movement in the United States.

These are of course percentages covering the entire decade of terrorism research that is under investigation here. [Figure 1](#) provides an insight into how the emphasis on these

**Figure 1.** Research focus over time.

different forms of terrorism has changed during this time period. Although there certainly have been some fluctuations, for instance the slightly greater emphasis placed on right-wing extremism between 2013 and 2015, the overall picture has remained the same. The popularity of jihadism as a topic of research has gone virtually unchallenged, as has the fact that national-liberation focused and left-wing extremist groups occupy second and third place. If there is one thing that typifies the research-focus within the field of terrorism research, it is consistency of interest.

A final set of results relates to the geographic focus of terrorism research. [Table 3](#) shows that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have drawn the most attention from scholars. This comes as no surprise, given that these countries are currently home to some of the most destructive armed conflicts involving terrorist groups. Asia, broadly defined here as stretching from Afghanistan to Japan, takes a firm second place which is again likely to stem from relevant geopolitical considerations, principally that Afghanistan and Pakistan have been at the heart of the so-called “Global War on Terrorism” launched in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. At 15,7%, North and Western Europe takes third place, which seems strongly tied to the interest in counterterrorism, foreign fighters and (homegrown) jihadism outlined above. The rest of the world has received considerably less interest from the terrorism-research community. North America and Africa both accounted for just over seven percent of all country-relevant keywords, while South America, Eastern Europe (including Russia and the former USSR), Australia and the Caribbean were found in less than two percent of country-relevant keywords.

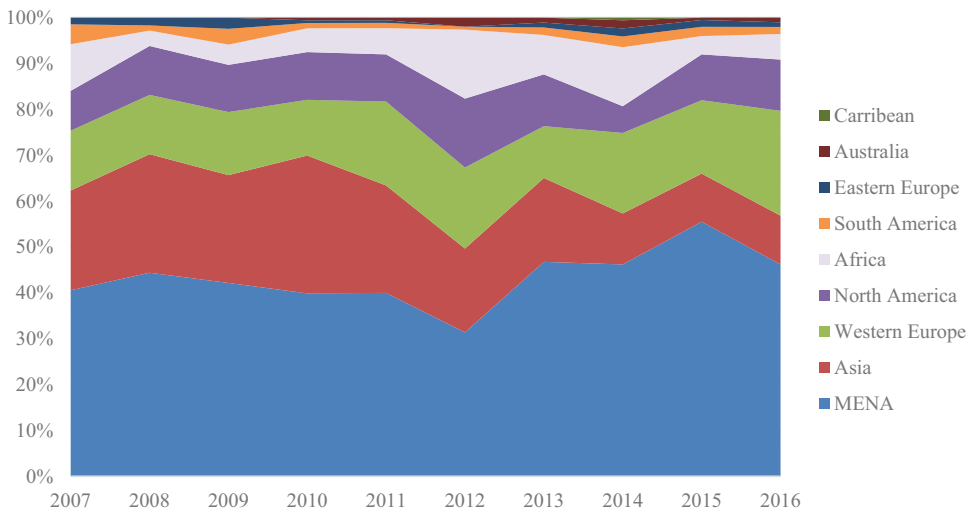
A look at how interest in these various regions has varied over time is provided by [Figure 2](#). Similar to the types of groups and individuals being studied, it is clear that the geographical focus of terrorism research has fluctuated during the period under investigation. Interest in Africa increased between 2010 and 2014, only to decrease again from 2015 onwards. While the MENA-region has always attracted the lions-share of attention, that share showed a marked increase between 2012 and 2015, likely due to the Syrian civil war and the rise of IS. Throughout the 2007–2016 period, the percentage of articles looking at Asia has decreased somewhat, going from 21,7% in 2007 to 10,7% in 2016, while interest in North and Western Europe rose from 13% to 22,8% during the same period.

## Discussion

This study’s results offer a variety of perspectives on the thematic focus of terrorism research between 2007 and 2016. But regardless of the angle, the overall picture looks

**Table 3.** Geographical focus of research.

Middle East & North Africa	43,8%
Asia	19,1%
North & Western Europe	15,7%
North America	7,1%
Africa	7,1%
South America	1,8%
Eastern Europe	1,2%
Australia	0,8%
Caribbean	0,1%



**Figure 2.** Geographical focus over time.

very much the same. Research on terrorism continues to be overwhelmingly focused on matters related to jihadism. This is reflected in the top five most-used keywords overall, where al-Qaeda and its affiliates, jihadism more broadly, IS, and Iraq make a consistent appearance. It is even more apparent when looking only at those keywords related to radical, extremist or terrorist groups and individuals, 74,5% of which focus on jihadism. This strong preoccupation with violence perpetrated by jihadists is also found in the regional focus of work on terrorism, which consistently shows that the MENA region has attracted the brunt of the attention.

This does not mean that nothing has changed. Within the focus on jihadism, for instance, there has been a shift away from al-Qaeda and its affiliates towards the Islamic State and, albeit to a far lesser degree, Jabhat al-Nusra. Moreover, although the focus on jihadist groups and individuals has remained more or less consistent between 2007 and 2016, attention for groups focused on national or regional liberation, as well as adherents of left-wing extremist views, has fluctuated quite a bit. Another caveat is that, taken together, the top-5 most-used keywords are still a minority share of the total number of keywords used. This raises the possibility that there is a greater degree of variety of (sub) topics than is represented by the most-used keywords. If so, however, it is not readily apparent in terms of the groups or regions that terrorism research has focused on. If there is one overall observation in this regard, it is that the field is marked by considerable thematic consistency in its focus on jihadism-related topics.

These findings lead to the conclusion that, as a whole, the field of terrorism research has not gotten appreciably better at developing a broader thematic focus. Not only is jihadism still the most-researched subject, but topics like right-wing extremist violence and state terrorism receive comparatively minute amounts of attention. This is surprising and indeed unwelcome given that, for instance, in recent years in the United States right-wing extremist terrorist attacks have come to outnumber those perpetrated by jihadists, and that right-wing extremism more generally is on the rise in Europe as well (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst 2018; Koehler 2017; Miller 2017). The

relative lack of interest for state terrorism arguably supports a key point made by *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. Namely, that a large segment of the research community appears to view terrorism as something virtually exclusive to non-state actors, which foregoes that states have historically, and arguably currently, been the most large-scale and “effective” users of this form of political violence (Blakeley 2007; Jackson, Murphy, and Poynting 2010; Jarvis and Lister 2014; Wright 2007).

Another key finding to emerge from the analysis is that research on terrorism has continued to show a significant mirroring of states’ terrorism-related concerns and counterterrorism interests. As the top-5 overview of most-used keywords suggests, terrorist attacks displaying a (relatively) new *modus operandi*, or the sudden outbreak of conflict in which terrorist groups have flourished (e.g. the Syrian civil war), led to an appreciable shift in research priorities. As a result, topics like “lone-actor terrorism” and “foreign fighters” came to occupy top-5 positions virtually out of the blue. To be clear, the problem is not that terrorism scholars focus their attention on such subjects, which is perfectly understandable given their societal and political impact. The issue here is that the field as a whole continues to be strongly swayed by such trends, rather than be driven by a research agenda that builds on the strength and weaknesses of the state-of-the-art.

It is instructive to compare the results of this study with Silke’s work to acquire a better understanding of developments in thematic focus over a longer period of time. Differences in methodological approach, with Silke looking at the thematic focus of articles and this study utilizing keywords as its unit of analysis, prevent a direct comparison but overall trends can still be usefully put next to each other. Silke (2009) found that that 13,2% of articles published in TPV and SCT between 2002 and 2004 focused on al-Qaeda and 57,3% focused on militant Islamism more broadly defined. These figures dropped to 9,7% and 38% respectively in the 2005–2007 period, but still represented the most-researched topics in those journals. This study noted a continuation of this trend, with al-Qaeda and its affiliates as well as jihadism more broadly consistently accounting for the most frequently encountered keywords and accounting for 74,5% of radical, extremist and terrorist groups and individuals studied.

What does appear to have changed over time, is the field’s focus on WMD terrorism and suicide attacks. Silke (2009) noted that 11,5% of articles focused on suicide terrorism in the 2002–2004 period, and 7,9% did so between 2005 and 2007. Similarly, he found that 5,7% of articles studied WMDs in relation to terrorism between 2002 and 2004, dropping to 3,7% in the years between 2005 and 2007. Again, these figures are not directly comparable with the present study, but the downward trend does appear to have continued. WMDs never featured in the top-5 most frequently encountered keywords in the 2007–2016 period, whereas suicide terrorism only held a top-5 position in 2007. This reinforces the overall conclusion that there is certainly fluctuation within the thematic focus of terrorism research, even if the overall picture is one of consistency of interest in matters related to jihadism.

These results suggest that the academic study of terrorism has made little progress in overcoming longstanding concerns about the state centrism of its focus. Governments’ terrorism-related concerns and preoccupations essentially continue to be adopted (and abandoned, as the WMD data indicates) as research agendas by large segments of the scholarly community. This has arguably been a major factor in the continued

overemphasis on *non-state* actors as research subjects, as well as the enduring and at times almost exclusive interest in the groups, locales and (shifting) modus operandi of jihadist terrorism. There is certainly a case to be made for viewing these findings as underling that many researchers (the present one included) continue to engage in counterterrorism by other means. But the question is whether, taken by itself, this should be grounds for concern.

Terrorist violence constitutes a clear and often particularly appalling threat to the wellbeing of individuals, communities and states. It is entirely legitimate for scholars to want to assist in addressing a key societal challenge by contributing their knowledge and expertise to gaining a better understanding of opponents utilizing this form of violence. Jihadism in particular has deserved, and will continue to deserve, the large amounts of attention given to it, as this form of terrorism has proven particularly deadly and persistent in many regions across the globe. The real issue with this focus is the risk of losing critical perspective and the objectivity that all good research should aspire to. This requires not so much the abandonment of jihadism as a topic of research, or ceasing to engage in projects that match (and are frequently funded by) government's interests, but critical reflection on the biases that state centrism in terrorism research can impute.

Ideally, such an exercise will lead to broader awareness within the community of terrorism researchers that the field remains heavily skewed towards jihadism as well as a perspective in which terrorism has become virtually synonymous with non-state actors. Hopefully, this will serve to broaden the field's topical focus by bringing about greater attention for developments among non-jihadist extremist and terrorist groups, as well as for states own roles in using or supporting terrorism. Again, the point is by no means that it is wrong to pursue state-funded research or to focus on groups like al-Qaeda, but researchers should more carefully assess what the potential side effects of pursuing government-aligned research agendas could be, for instance in terms of promulgating one-sided perception of what terrorism is (Youngman 2018). Not just because these can impute one-sidedness into the academic debate, but because how terrorism is perceived and discussed by politicians, the media and pundits has much broader and far-reaching societal implications.

Of course, none of these points are particularly novel. Terrorism researchers have been raising these issues for years (Ranstorp 2007; Silke 2004a; Youngman 2018). So why do they persist? Partly this is because "[d]ramatic terrorist attacks produce demands for immediate understandings of what happened and why" (Weinberg and Eubank 2008, 185). As publics and governments seek to respond to the latest terrorist drama, the newest insurgent safe-haven or the most recent evolution of terrorist tactics, one recourse frequently taken is to make funding available so that academics can help make sense of what occurred and contribute to its future prevention. The most-used keywords clearly reflect this, with topics like "lone-actor terrorism" and "foreign fighters" suddenly making the top-ten only to be replaced a year or two later. Although the focus on the latest and most visible iteration of the terrorist threat makes sense from a problem-solving perspective, it also makes it difficult for academics to work on topics other than the latest threat. Not just in terms of government funding streams, but also academic ones, as the increasing importance attached to achieving societal impact as well as research excellence (e.g. NWO 2018; University of Oxford 2019) can serve to

favour proposals addressing those aspects of terrorism that have gotten the most (recent) attention from the media and politicians.

The considerable attention that terrorism is given in Western politics and journalism also creates space for academics and other experts to deliver advice to policymakers and provide media commentary (Youngman 2018). Again, however, the ability to do so is predicated to at least some extent on a willingness and ability to maintain “relevance” by working on and speak to those topics currently making headlines. Of course, these issues should not be overstated; there is certainly room for academics to make careers without continuously responding to the latest iteration of the terrorist threat. Indeed, some of the best have achieved that status and long-lasting influence in part precisely because they have tackled broader underlying themes rather than the latest development (See Silke and Schmidt-Petersen 2017). Still, the urgency of the immediate and the desire to not only understand societal ills like terrorism but to help address them, do arguably contribute to the lopsided research focus reported here.

Attaining a broader topical focus will require ongoing effort on the part of individual scholars. But it also mandates attention from academic funding bodies and especially from government agencies involved in preventing or countering terrorism. Ultimately, unbalanced research agenda's, the negative effects this could have on public and political perceptions of what terrorism is and is not, and an overemphasis on reacting to the immediate rather than understanding underlying dynamics, are to no-one's benefit. Furthermore, preventing a blinkered threat-perception from allowing potential new challengers from developing unnoticed until they can constitute a key terrorism-related threat should be part and parcel of long-term counterterrorism strategies.

Finally, achieving change will also require the field of terrorism studies to seek ways of redressing two long-standing concerns. First, 75% of the work continues to be done by one-time contributors, which impedes in-depth engagement with debates such as those charted here (Schuurman 2018). Second, the lack of clear professional standards means that the label “terrorism expert” can at times be claimed by individuals who prioritize sensationalism over careful research, ultimately harming not just the field's image but also doing a disservice to public and political debates on an important and sensitive topic (Stampnitzky 2014). Hopefully, the results presented here will help maintain awareness of long-standing issues in research on terrorism and thereby contribute to addressing them.

## Conclusion

This article set out to examine the topical focus of research on terrorism in the 2007–2016 period and to assess whether it had been able to address criticisms that the field was too focused on jihadism and too strongly tied to government-driven research agendas. Unfortunately, keyword analysis of the 2,552 research-focused articles published in nine leading journals on terrorism within this period clearly demonstrated the field's almost singular focus on jihadism remains in place. So does the event-driven nature of terrorism studies, with research interests clearly influenced by dramatic developments in the terrorist threat and government's changing counterterrorism priorities. Of course, there are many good reasons for studying such topics. The problem is not that the field of terrorism studies favours applied

research on topical themes, but that it appears to do so almost to the exclusion of other subjects no less deserving of attention.

All of this matters, and not just because the overwhelming focus on jihadism has left our understand of other types of terrorism underdeveloped. What we define and study as terrorism, and particularly what we *do not*, has an influence on how politicians, the media and broader society conceptualize this form of political violence and its potential future permutation (Chermak and Gruenewald 2006; Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux 2019). The marked underrepresentation of right-wing extremist terrorism and state terrorism, for example, has arguably helped foster a perception of terrorism as something that is solely the domain of non-state actors and virtually synonymous with jihadists. This is not only incorrect, but a potentially dangerous blind spot as it allows non-jihadist forms of extremism to develop and be carried out relatively unnoticed. Moreover, such biases can contribute to societal polarization by feeding the appearance that terrorism stems from one particular community only.

Hopefully, the findings presented here will help push terrorism studies to embrace a broader and less event-driven research agenda. There is much to be gained both academically and societally from looking beyond jihadism, particularly where it comes to growing concerns about right-wing extremism and terrorism. But, as the discussion noted, responsibility for the enduring nature of the field's narrow topical focus cannot be laid solely at the feet of individual researchers. The community of terrorism scholars needs to continue working to create a larger group of dedicated researchers with the in-depth knowledge of the field required to be able to move it forward. No less important, finally, is that the government bodies who so often fund terrorism research gain a greater appreciation of the potential for biases in the way terrorism is studied to affect not just their counterterrorism policies, but broader political and societal debates about the extent and nature of the terrorist threat.

## Notes

1. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KITPRA>.
2. The table on p.5 of the RAND report indicates that "Jihadi-inspired extremists", "Muslim extremists", "Iraqi extremists" and the "Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP)" were together responsible for 31 attacks in the 2010–2016 period. At the same time, "Anti-Muslim extremists", "Anti-Government extremists", "White extremists (supremacists/nationalists)", "Anti-Abortion extremists", "Sovereign Citizen", "Anti-Semitic extremists", "Right-wing extremists" and the "United Aryan Empire" were responsible for 50 attacks.

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## Data availability

The dataset used here is available for download at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KITPRA>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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