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Publications

Counterterrorism Professionals on Terrorism Research: An End-User Assessment

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Introduction

Academic research began to focus specifically on terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, although it would take until the 9/11 attacks before the burgeoning field took on its [current form](#) and significantly increased output. From those early days in the mid-to-late twentieth century onwards, terrorism research has had a distinctly applied focus, with a significant number of writers on the subject trying—not just to understand the terrorist threat—but to counter it. Despite [ongoing debate](#) about whether such policy-orientated research comes at the [price of objectivity](#), many scholars [continue to tie](#) their objects of study closely to areas of government interest.

Given this long tradition of practice and policy-orientated research, it is surprising that there appear to be few attempts at explicit elicitation of end-user requirements, or [feedback on completed studies](#). While many research projects—especially [those funded by government agencies](#)—deal with topics of interest to policymakers and professionals working to detect, prevent, and respond to terrorism, little is known about the degree to which academic research on terrorism is effectively responding to the knowledge-based needs of its potential end-users. This can be contrasted with fields such as software development and engineering, where ‘requirements elicitation’ or ‘end-user needs assessment’ are [widely recognised](#) as key steps towards ensuring the delivery of effective products and services. Although not [altogether absent](#), the limited degree to which this occurs in the terrorism studies domain is reflected by the inclusion of a need to narrow the ‘theory-practice gap’ in both [2011](#) and [2018](#) assessments of un- and under-research topics. The alleged presence of a divide between the worlds of academia and practice was also one of the core contentions of Sageman’s highly critical [2014 article](#) on the state of terrorism research.

This ICCT Perspective provides some first insights into counterterrorism professionals’ views of the academic field. Using the results of a survey distributed among attendees of [ICCT events](#) held in The Hague in 2019 and through the [ICCT newsletter](#) to a larger international audience, insights are presented on the degree to which academic research on terrorism is actually able to speak to the concerns and questions of policymakers and professionals working in, for instance, policing, intelligence or prevention programs. This Perspective is part of a larger effort on ICCT’s behalf to

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engage with its readership in order to further improve its ability to provide policy and practice relevant academically informed output.

A brief note on survey design

A 23-question survey was put together by the author of this Perspective in cooperation with his colleagues at ICCT. The questionnaire was made ready for use through the 'SurveyMonkey' platform and a link to the survey was sent out to 2019 ICCT event participants and included in the monthly ICCT newsletter. The earliest response dates from June 2019, the latest to be included in this paper from November 2019. The survey was accompanied by a short description of its purpose, principally the desire to assess the degree to which academic research matches the actual interest of policymakers and practitioners working on counterterrorism and the prevention of radicalisation. This description also emphasised that no data would be collected that could be used to personally identify participants or their employers, and made clear that the results of the survey would be incorporated into a publication that would be made available on open-access basis on the ICCT website. Rounding off the introduction to the actual survey questions was a brief paragraph on ICCT itself, instructions for completing the survey, the estimation that it would take 6 minutes to do so, and contact details for the person in charge of running the survey.

At the time of writing, a total of 95 individuals have completed the ICCT end-user survey, taking on average 8 minutes to do so. While this number of respondents allows some interesting insights to be conveyed about how counterterrorism professionals use and view research on terrorism, it is of course too small to be taken as a representative sample. Particularly as of those 95, only 59 self-described as working in a policy or practice-related role in a counterterrorism or preventing radicalization context. This piece does not claim to represent the views of 'the' counterterrorism community. Instead, it should be seen as a first step towards learning more about the degree to which academic work on terrorism matches the interests and requirements of counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners, particularly those from Western Europe and North America.

Results and discussion

To provide some context for the substantive questions asked in the middle part of the questionnaire, some basic information about respondents was elicited. Results are presented in percentages but without decimal points as a nod to the small sample size.

Getting to the right respondents

Asked whether they considered themselves to 'work in the field of counterterrorism / preventing radicalization', 82% (n=77) answered 'yes', 11% (n=10) chose 'no' and 7% (n=7) indicated they were unsure. Those who did not self-identify as working in this field were left filtered out of the remaining survey items, meaning that the only the answers provided by 84 out of 95 respondents were given further consideration.

These 84 respondents were then asked about their current professional status. To ensure the survey results reflected the views of the policymaker and practitioner communities, the input provided by those who chose 'academic / researcher', 'student' or 'general public' was not given further consideration. Similarly, under the category 'other (please specify)' only those respondents were selected who had indicated a professional role related to the policy or practice fields. Through this selection process, the total number of surveys included for further analysis dropped from 84 to 59. Of these 59 respondents, 54% (n=32) indicated they were practitioners, 25% (n=15) were policymakers, 15% (n=9) chose 'other' and 5% (n=3) were politicians or elected officials

working on a radicalization prevention or counterterrorism dossier.[i] From here on, all references to respondents relate to the subset of 59 described here.

Describing the respondents

In terms of gender, 61% of the subsample of 59 were male (n=36) and 39% female (n=23). The age-range of these respondents ran from 27 to 78, with an average of 46 years and a median age of 47. On the basis of this distribution, it seems reasonable to assume that the sample represents mid to senior-level professionals with considerable experience in their respective fields. Respondents were also generally highly educated; 81% (n=48) held a bachelor's degree or higher qualification. Specifically, 17% (n=10) had completed bachelor-level education, 53% (n=31) held a master's and 10% (n=6) were PhDs.[ii] When it comes to geographical focus, respondents were overwhelmingly from Western Europe (78%, n=46), followed by North America (10%, n=6), and the MENA-region a distant third (5%, n=3).

Respondents were asked what type of organisation they currently work for. Figure 1 shows that, at 34% (n=20), most represent police organisations with the broad category of 'other' in second place at 19% (n=11). Those who specified this category indicated a broad range of employers, including aviation security, international organisations, and non-profits.[iii] Local and national-level governments are also quite well represented, followed by intelligence and security agencies, and an equal distribution among legal professions, probation and parole services, inter or intra-government (CT) coordinating bodies, and think-tanks. None of the 59 respondents prison services. Likely, this is simply due to the relatively small sample size. The small number (n=1) of military professionals, however, might also reflect the preference of most Western European states to pursue a [rule-of-law based approach to counterterrorism](#).

Figure 1: Type of organizations that respondents work for (n=59)

In terms of the roles within these organisations, Figure 2 illustrates how respondents' answers show a preponderance of operational (20%, n=12) and policy (19%, n=11) positions, with research-related posts, investigation-oriented roles and management functions in shared third place (14%, n=8 each). This is useful information in that it shows that the survey reached respondents who are actually well-positioned to provide a policymaker and practitioner perspective on terrorism-related research. This is strengthened further by considering that 64% (n=38) of respondents indicated having at least 5 years of experience in the field of counterterrorism or the prevention of radicalisation.

Figure 2: Respondents' professional roles (n=59)[iv]

Counterterrorism professionals' access to research on terrorism

Having narrowed down the respondents to the proper target audience and after getting a look at their backgrounds, it is now time to move on to the content-side of the survey. Unfortunately, response rates to the questions in this section took a significant dive, with approximately a third of respondents opting to skip survey items. This may be due to the slightly more time-intensive nature of these questions, tied to the higher frequency of open-ended as opposed to multiple choice designs. In any case, these fluctuations in the response rates once again emphasise that this survey is simply a first exploration of these end-users' views on the academic literature on terrorism.

Returning to the survey, 89% (n=39) of respondents who answered the question indicated that they 'read academic articles related to (counter)terrorism or

'radicalization' as part of their jobs. Essentially similar numbers (89%, n=40)[v] indicated they also read such articles in their free time. With regard to frequency, a majority of respondents (55%, n=24) read such articles 'very often (1-2 times per week)', with a further 23% (n=10) opting for 'often (1-2 per month)'. This would indicate an at least relatively high level of familiarity with academic research on (counter)terrorism and radicalisation.

The survey also asked users to indicate *how* they accessed academic articles. Respondents were able to give multiple answers to this question and the results indicate a broad range of means being employed. Most popular at 69% (n=31) was accessing articles by visiting specific websites, such as icct.nl. In second-place was 'they are e-mailed to me' (64%, n=29), with 'search engines' and 'through colleagues' taking shared third at 58% (n=26). These results indicate the importance of professional networks for research dissemination and perhaps the utility of mailing lists and digests of recently published works. In fourth was 'social media' (44%, n=20) while the least popular option for accessing research was through subscriptions to specific journals (40%, n=18).

Some 42 respondents gave further insights into how they come into contact with research on terrorism by specifying the 'journals, websites or think tanks' that they consulted most frequently. The most frequently named venue was ICCT (31%, n=13), which probably reflects the selection bias inherent in approaching respondents through the ICCT mailing list and events. In second place was the answer 'various journals' (19%, n=8), and in third the journal *Perspectives on Terrorism* (14%, n=6). Coming in at fourth place were 'newspaper and other (digital) media' (12%, n=5), with the *Soufan Centre* at number five (10%, n=4). It is interesting to see one particular journal on terrorism be mentioned so explicitly, which may be due it being one of the only completely open-access journals. With journals like *Terrorism and Political Violence* still largely behind paywalls, the open access component may be especially important to non-academic audiences who often lack institutional subscriptions to academic outlets.

Counterterrorism professionals' views on terrorism research

Respondents were asked 'does the academic literature on (counter)terrorism and radicalization address topics relevant to your work?'. Of the 45 that provided an answer, the majority (47%, n=21) answered 'usually', while 9% (n=4) said 'always'. For a slender majority of 56% of policymakers and practitioners, therefore, research on terrorism does a good job of providing relevant academic insights. On the other hand, while no-one answered 'never', 2% (n=1) opted for 'rarely' and 40% (n=18) elected 'sometimes'. This would indicate that there is clearly room for improvement if the study of terrorism is to effectively address and help deal with policy and practice-relevant challenges.

Asked to elaborate on these views, 42 respondents provided further insights. Among those who explained the more critical appraisals of the practical utility of terrorism research, one issue clearly stood out. Although their exact words differed, 10 respondents argued that research on terrorism was either too abstract or theoretical to have clear utility for policymakers or practitioners. As one response summarised, the 'distance between theory and practice is to[o] big'. This argument will be very familiar to academics who have spent any amount of time with those working in policy and practice, but it is interesting to note here if for no other reason than its continued relevance.

To get further insights into what exactly the literature on terrorism is *not* doing a good job of covering, respondents were also asked whether there were topics that the field

does not address at all'. Some 39% (n=17) answered in the affirmative, 41% (n=18) indicated they did not know and only 23% (n=10) said 'no'. Although there is clearly some margin for error here, the balance of opinion seems to tend towards the sceptical. The 38 respondents who offered further clarification pointed to numerous topics they felt to be understudied. Several were highlighted by two or more respondents, namely; practical intervention methods for reaching those who are radicalising (e.g. bringing about a cognitive opening), right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, pedagogical perspectives on radicalisation, non-Western experts, and a non-Western topical focus.^[vi] Hopefully, these responses can provide input to policy and practice-orientated researchers.

Next, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statement that 'the quality of research on (counter)terrorism / radicalization is high'. In first place at a combined total of 53% were those who had selected 'agree' (44%, n=20) or 'strongly agree' (9%, n=4). This was followed by 31% (n=14) who were more ambivalent, having chosen 'neither agree nor disagree'. Only 6% were outspokenly critical, indicating they 'disagreed' (4%, n=2) or 'strongly disagreed' 2%, n=1), with a further 9% (n=4) choosing 'don't know'. While these responses indicate that the field is certainly not viewed in negative terms, the quite strongly represented ambivalent position is another indication that there is considerable room for improvement. Elaborations on these responses were quite varied; the tendency towards overtly abstract writing was emphasised again, but so was a perceived tendency among academics to publish unsubstantiated research and a notion that academics could be too sure of themselves. Reaching potential end-users effectively is not just about content, but also about attitudes.

When looking at trends over time, results appear generally positive. Approximately 53% (n=24) indicated that academic research on (counter)terrorism and radicalisation had become 'more relevant' in recent years. Only 9% (n=4) thought it had become less so, with 13% (n=6) indicating they did not know and 24% (n=11) seeing no change. Asked about changes in the *quality* of this research, 47% (n=21) indicated it had improved, 29% (n=13) did not know, 20% (n=9) saw no change and only 4% (n=2) thought it had declined. The reputation of academic research on terrorism among policymakers and practitioners appears quite solid in terms of relevance and quality.

Finally, the questionnaire put a number of statements to respondents and asked them to indicate their degree of agreement. More respondents agreed than disagreed (43%, n=19 versus 30%, n=13) that 'research on (counter)terrorism and radicalization is too theoretical'. Still, some 77% (n=34) agreed that is nevertheless a 'valuable resource'. At 82% (n=36), there was even more agreement that this type of research 'should be [made] more relevant for policymakers and practitioners'. To this end, 75% (n=33) of respondents thought researchers should 'consult more closely with policymakers and practitioners when designing their studies'. Concomitantly, the notion that 'researchers should remain independent of policymakers and practitioners' was less prevalent at 48% (n=21). Still, such closeness does not appear to preclude a critical perspective; 77% (n=34) of respondents agreed that '[r]esearch that critically assesses government counterterrorism approaches is useful'.

Conclusion

In terms of number of respondents, this survey is too small to provide a conclusive assessment of counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners' views on academic research on terrorism. Still, there are some useful if necessarily tentative insights that may be drawn. In general, the picture that emerges is one of careful optimism. These potential 'end-users' of research on terrorism hold its quality in high regard and note an

upward trajectory in recent years. Where most of the criticism is focused is on the *relevance* of these studies for practitioners and policymakers. Research is seen as being too theoretical, too focused on concepts and generally too removed from the daily (political) reality of the respondents to be of optimal practical value. In part, such criticism could be said to stem simply from unfamiliarity with the academy; research is not (just) there to provide answers to practical problems. And, given the complexity of terrorism, the hope that any answers that are provided will be clear-cut should be tempered. On the other hand, the concerns over relevance, and the well-supported view that scholars should consult more closely with potential end-users before engaging on research projects, point to clear opportunities for further improvement. Researchers should not strive to sit in the policymaker or practitioners' seat and tell them what course to pursue, but instead provide them with dispassionate, well-informed and (self-)critical advice. The feedback from the policy and practice community presented here indicates that there is plenty of support for such constructive but critical engagement.

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Notes

[i] The specific terms used were: 'retired', 'international consultant public security', 'manager', 'advisor', 'international civil servant', 'international forensic advisor', '[redacted] terrorism task force', 'jobber', and 'aviation security trainer'.

[ii] These figures include one respondent who had selected 'other' and specified the attainment of a 'doctoraal', which was the name for the Dutch educational system's Bachelor equivalent. This response was therefore considered a Bachelor-level qualification.

[iii] Three answers flagged as 'other' were reassigned based on the descriptions provided; 1 to police, 2 to 'legal / public prosecution' and 1 to '(CT) coordination office'.

[iv] Some bars extend beyond round numbers because Excel does not round percentages down to the closest round number in charts.

[v] The same percentage is possible despite the higher number of respondents due to fluctuations in the number of respondents who skipped questions.

[vi] Other suggestions for under-studied topics were: the influence of politics and public opinion on policy formulation; why people don't radicalize; suggestions for a particular regional focus; suggestions for more research from a particular academic discipline; research on legal trials against terrorists; aviation security; environmental terrorism; causes of terrorism; religion and cultural heritage; collecting forensic evidence; the practicalities of implementing P/CVE programs; interdisciplinary research; cyber threats; best practices (i.e. 'what works') based on high-quality sources; comparative research.



