

Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism

Volume I: Reflections from the Last Decade

ICCT Journal Special Edition

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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Foreword

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) was founded on the conviction that long-term security is best achieved through counter-terrorism policy and practice that adheres to the rule of law and human rights. Over the last ten years, we have worked to make that a reality, engaging with an incredible network of international experts to deliver agenda-setting research, policy advice and hands-on implementation in affected communities around the world.

Now, as we mark ICCT's 10th anniversary, it seems a fitting moment to ask a fundamental question: is the conviction that drives our work becoming more accepted globally?

If we reflect on the last two decades of the Global War on Terrorism, we can compile a long list of human rights violations and failures to uphold the rule of law. Yet, we should also recognise efforts to learn from these failures and address them.

Where we saw the horrific images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, we now have the Nelson Mandela Rules that establish standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners, including for violent extremist offenders (VEOs) and the management of the prisons that house them. While we let Camp Bucca function as a hotbed of radicalisation and the eventual birthplace of the Islamic State, we now have a sophisticated range of risk assessment tools for VEOs, as well as a rich understanding of good practices for the rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs.

Where it was once considered easier to kill foreign terrorist fighters on the battlefield than to prosecute them for their crimes, we now have the Abuja Recommendations and other globally-agreed frameworks to help nations collect, use and share evidence for the purpose of criminal prosecution of terrorist suspects.

Where we once defaulted to heavily securitised responses to terror threats in our societies, we now have many examples of holistic national strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism. These rely on early detection of individuals at risk of radicalisation, as well as tailor-made intervention strategies that engage teachers, health practitioners, social services, local civil society organisations, religious leaders, and other stakeholders who coordinate with and work alongside police and intelligence services.

Where the internet was previously a breeding ground for extremist ideologies – both jihadi and right-wing – and a safe space for extremists to recruit and radicalise, we now have the Christchurch Call and other public-private partnerships. These showcase the impact that technology companies and national governments can have when they work together towards the goal of eliminating terrorist and violent extremist content online, while simultaneously upholding fundamental rights including freedom of expression and data privacy.

There is indeed much to celebrate.

Yet, despite this progress, we must also admit that the terrorist threat is in many respects worse than it was when ICCT was founded ten years ago.

Foreword

While the Islamic State's caliphate fell some time ago now, the group's brand and ideology has proliferated well beyond Iraq and Syria. Despite a concerted global effort to counter the Islamic State, the group remains highly effective at exploiting local grievances and co-opting local insurgencies to gain strategic advantage. As a result, the Islamic State now has deadly and well-organised affiliates in the Sinai, Yemen, the Greater Sahel, West Africa, Central Africa, Somalia, Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia.

Similarly, al-Qaeda has proven its resilience. It has survived years of intense counter-terrorism pressure as well as an ideological and physical battle with the Islamic State over the future of jihadism. In recent years, it has re-emerged, leveraging affiliates and franchises to once again launch attacks across Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Additionally, the extremist ideology at the heart of Islamic State and al-Qaeda has inspired a "democratisation" of terrorism in the West, whereby radicalised individuals or small groups – often entirely disconnected from any formal terror network – have been inspired to launch sensational attacks across Europe using vehicles, knives and other readily-available weapons. Preventing and countering this type of threat continues to be challenging for law enforcement officials, while the psychological impact on European populations has been significant.

In part as a consequence, there has been a powerful backlash against Muslim communities in Europe and North America and a deepening of social divisions in our societies. This polarisation has triggered a rise in hate speech and sympathy for dangerous conspiracy theories that authorities struggle to contain. It has created political and social openings for organised right-wing groups espousing extremist ideology. Tragically, it has also manifest in right-wing terror attacks that have taken lives from Oslo to El Paso.

While our attention is held by these domestic threats, it is easy to forget that there are still tens of thousands of people being held in terrible and inhumane conditions at Al-Hol and other camps for those who formerly lived in territory held by the Islamic State. This includes thousands of European foreign terrorist fighters and their families, most of whom are being denied repatriation on national security grounds while simultaneously being subject to administrative measures such as stripping of nationality that in some cases violate international law and due process. Furthermore, for victims impacted by the Islamic State, achieving justice will remain elusive until the perpetrators face prosecution.

These are just some of the issues that underline the continued relevance of institutions like ICCT that seek to prevent and counter violent extremism and terrorism while upholding human rights and the rule of law. Much work remains, and we are committed to working together with our partners around the world in pursuit of this mission.

Alexander von Rosenbach
Interim Director, ICCT

A Note from the Editors

This Special Edition journal series is a celebration of the ten-year anniversary of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT, The Hague). Volume I is a collection of key work of the last ten years in counter-terrorism research. The volume has been curated by the five directors that ICCT has had since its founding in 2010. In Volume II, our editorial team have curated five unique pieces that we believe encompass some of the main contemporary issues in counter-terrorism research.

Each former director was asked to choose a particularly impactful or otherwise memorable publication from their tenure. They were further asked to reflect on their choices, and consider why they stand out. Their choices are presented for you here in celebration of the work of ICCT's contributors from years past.

The articles in Volume I are their originals and no changes have been made since their publication, nor have the affiliations of the authors been updated to reflect changes to their positions since. They comprise a diversity of the formats published within ICCT, as well the breadth of themes we address in our publications. In the case of the second piece, "Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies" (2016), for the sake of length, we have only included the executive summary (you can find the full length report on our website).

Though these articles reflect past work, many of them remain as relevant as ever today. We hope you enjoy them.

The Editors
International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)