

Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism

Volume II: Contemporary Developments

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

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050
E: info@icct.nl
www.icct.nl

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Foreword

Predicting the future is highly overrated. Many people like to know about the weather forecast, the predictions of trends in the stock markets and the projected outcomes of the elections. Looking at forecasts is a common habit and they are all signs of the wish to reduce uncertainty and to gain control over what is uncontrollable. Even though it is overrated, in a world full of uncertainty it is understandable behaviour.

Terrorism is often rooted in a similar, but more far-fetched, prediction of the future. Extremists often theorize about the end of time, the end of history, the end of a culture and try to accelerate actions to be ready for the future. Even though this may seem contradictory, the fact that their actions contribute to chaos, fear and confusion is often seen as an advantage. They often try to help the predicted future to come true, as if they help in fulfilling the apocalyptic prophecies. A terrorist takes the future in their own hands and acts upon their impulses, driven by fear. Often with deadly consequences.

If we want to predict the future of terrorism, we should try to answer two questions. First, will fear and apocalyptic thinking reduce or increase in the coming years? Second, will the number of extremist activists increase or decrease? My guess is they will both increase.

Yet, the future is only marginally influenced by predictions. Also, history is not a straight line. It happens in shocks, triggered by sudden, mostly unpredicted, events. For example, the events of 9/11 in New York and Washington, the banking crisis of 2008, the Arab Spring, the COVID-19 pandemic were not effectively predicted. Yet, they all changed the course of world history. But still no one saw these events coming, or at least, if there were early warning signals, there was very little early preventative action. Let me explain why I think that both fear and extremist activism will increase, and how this relates to the evolution of counterterrorism to come.

‘Modernity’ and its changes

‘Modernity’ as it emerged from the renaissance is defined by its belief in science, individualism, secularism and market systems. That format of ‘modernity’ is spreading rapidly across the globe - we call it globalisation and development.

The downside of this proliferation of ‘modernity’ is the risk that individualism, market, consumerism and competition replace sets of historically rooted value systems – ones which often extend from religious belief systems. That may lead to uncertainty about value systems, about what is right and wrong. The resulting search for moral guidance bring some people back to very strict interpretations of religion. On top of that is the fact that individualism and competition are a lottery - there are some winners and many losers. Being a loser can be bearable under the promise of heaven and salvation after life in the case of religious terrorism.

There is little reason to expect that ‘modernity’ will go away any time soon. On the contrary, it is spreading its wings. While many will benefit from modernity, some will turn their fear and their loss into opposition. Some will be attracted to charismatic and strong leaders

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with apparent scapegoats and easy answers, while others will fall for the anchors found in fundamentalist interpretations of religion.

Global expansion and interconnection

The world is increasingly interconnected. From Mali to Taiwan, people know instantly about the current events and state of affairs in New York and Brazil via 24/7 social media and newsfeeds. Fake news and alternative facts brew mistrust, and some may suspect that there are powers that manipulate events. The average citizen increasingly distrusts facts. They start to see things hidden behind the facts. Many of the comments online are filled with anger, fear, aggression and loneliness. And in the interconnected world the social fabric is suffering. Online activity and offline isolation may lead to more instances of lone actors perpetrating violence.

The rise of populism and nationalism

The world has fought and won the battle against Marxism and communism. The young generation doesn't even know about the wall in Berlin, the iron curtain, or the Cuban missile crisis. When the Berlin wall fell, somebody wrote: "the fact that communism has failed doesn't mean that capitalism is a success." Very true. There are cracks and other disappointments, worries and concerns about the nature of the victorious system. More recently 'populism', driven by fear and anti-elitist sentiments, has popped up as a counter culture. In the absence of a political arena that effectively settles disputes the chances of other forms of extreme political activism are evident.

The challenges identified above are of concern, and will no doubt impact the field of counterterrorism for years to come. We are likely to see rises in both fear, and extremist activities which may feed off these themes.

Yet, recognizing these also allows us the foresight to consider how these concerns can more constructively and directly be reflected in both preventative and countering violent extremism work (P/CVE), and direct counterterrorism work going forward, as well as the wider political and societal responses required. Combinations of diverse actors conducting social, political and other community-based approaches within a human rights and rule of law-based approach will be required to respond to this continuously changing world, to provide both new and familiar solutions and approaches. I have no doubt that ICCT will continue to be at the forefront of these discussions.

Peter Knoope

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 - The Hague (ICCT). Volume I is a collection of key work of the last ten years in counter-terrorism research 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 the diversity and breadth of key contemporary issues in counter-terrorism research.

Earlier this year ICCT had an open call for submissions based on what our contributors viewed as some of the most topical issues in counter-terrorism. The five pieces here were chosen because the authors demonstrated what we believe to be valuable insights into some of the most unique and challenging issues in the field of counter-terrorism as faced by practitioners and researchers alike.

The articles not only reflect on the state of the art in broader terrorism research, but also provide a forward-looking perspective to challenges that will continue to be faced in the field of counter-terrorism. We hope you enjoy them.

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