# ICCT Annual Conference 2025

## 15/15 Vision: Looking Back, Moving Forward

On 4 December 2025, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) hosted its 15th Annual Conference in The Hague. The event gathered nearly 100 participants from across Europe and beyond, including policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers. It was held behind closed doors, under the Chatham House Rule. Below we provide a short summary of key discussions from the day.
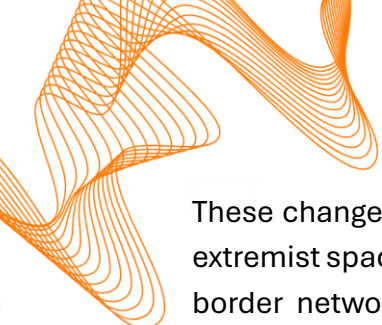
### From Past to Present: How Terrorism Has Evolved, and What Comes Next

The opening statement highlighted the key achievements of ICCT over the last 15 years, making it one of the leading think tanks on preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism.

The Keynote Speech focused on the evolution of terrorism throughout the past 20 years, and looked at possible future directions. Terrorism is often understood through a "conventional" lens that organises the field by ideology. Right-wing violence in the West peaked around 2019 and has declined since, though it is unclear whether the threat has genuinely diminished or simply shifted into other arenas such as political activism or less visible violence. Jihadism has unfolded in two major European waves: the post-9/11 attacks of the 2000s, and the ISIS-driven violence of the 2010s. While the latter subsided after 2017–2018, recent geopolitical developments may be triggering the start of a new wave. Left-wing extremism shows signs of becoming more action-oriented again, while state-linked terrorism and hybrid warfare are emerging through sabotage and criminal proxies.

Stepping away from ideology, several cross-cutting developments reshape how extremism functions across all movements. The most important is the virtualisation of radicalisation. Research increasingly shows that individuals can radicalise almost entirely online, without sustained offline contact. This shift runs in parallel with the rise of lone-actor terrorism, now one of the most consistent trends in Western countries. Online spaces enable lone-actor violence by providing propaganda, practical guidance, and social validation. These dynamics are also linked to higher visibility of mental health issues and the rise of "DIY" or "salad-bar" ideologies, where individuals mix elements from different extremist and online subcultures without organisational discipline.

These changes have also altered the demographics of terrorism. Teenagers can access extremist spaces directly from their bedrooms, sometimes forming entirely online, cross-border networks. There is also concern that radicalisation timelines are shortening, particularly among young people exposed to constant, immersive online content, although more research is still needed on this aspect.

Together, these shifts create a growing "grey zone" between terrorism, mental illness, and other forms of violence, complicating legal definitions, public debate, and prevention efforts. Looking ahead, new technologies – especially AI – are likely to intensify these dynamics rather than reverse them. In short, terrorism continues evolving, and requires constant efforts to understand it and to inform policy responses. ICCT was described as a clear asset in that regard.
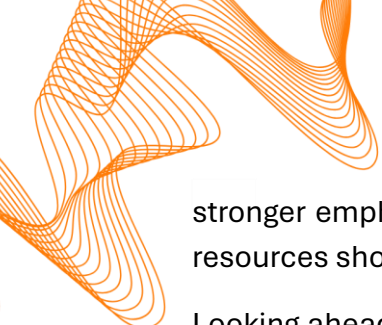
### Shaping the Field: Lessons from ICCT's Past and Present Leadership

ICCT was founded in 2010 in response to dissatisfaction in Europe with the dominant post-9/11 War on Terror approach. While the United States framed counter-terrorism as a global war centred on military force and expansive security measures, many European actors questioned both its effectiveness and its compatibility with human rights and the rule of law. Early attempts to address terrorism through international criminal law failed, largely because there was no agreed legal definition of terrorism. This legal dead end prompted a shift in strategy: a new institution – ICCT – was created to examine the relationship between terrorism, counter-terrorism measures, and human rights. From the outset, ICCT's core mission has been to further counter-terrorism research and policy work, embedding rule of law and root causes thinking.

The next major phase began in the mid-2010s with the rise of the so-called Islamic State and large-scale foreign fighter mobilisation. Policymakers urgently needed evidence-based answers about who was travelling, why, and what risks this posed. ICCT played a pioneering role by producing some of the first systematic, transparent research on foreign fighters, their profiles, and their trajectories. This period also marked an early recognition of social media as a central tool for recruitment and propaganda, and a strong commitment to analysing terrorism through multiple lenses, including gender, youth, radicalisation processes, and international law – all areas of expertise ICCT has focused on and developed through the years.

By the early 2020s, the threat landscape appeared to be shifting again. Jihadist violence declined, budgets were shrinking, and there was growing uncertainty about what the "next chapter" would be. ICCT's response was twofold: continue rigorous work on unresolved legacy issues such as returnees and prisons, while cautiously exploring emerging challenges including online ecosystems, hybrid threats, and new technologies. A defining feature of this phase has been translating research into practice, alongside a

stronger emphasis on evaluation to reflect critically on what actually works and where resources should be spent.

Looking ahead, the environment is increasingly complex: threats are more mixed, more technological, and more politically entangled. Against this backdrop, ICCT's key added value lies in bridging research, policy, and practice, providing evidence, context, and institutional memory in a field shaped by rapid turnover, short political timeframes, and recurring cycles of crisis.

## Advising Policy: Insights from Leaders

Terrorism in Europe has shifted away from large, centrally coordinated plots toward lone actors and very small cells. While complex attacks have not disappeared, most are now disrupted early due to improved counter-terrorism cooperation. The main operational reality today is individual attackers using simple, easily accessible weapons. Extremist organisations have adapted accordingly, moving from directing attacks to inspiring and enabling individuals through propaganda, practical guidance, and online connections rather than direct operational control.

This shift is closely tied to the growing importance of online radicalisation. Individuals can now radicalise largely or entirely online, often outside the view of families, schools, or communities. Extremist content no longer needs to be actively sought out: algorithms and recommendation systems can quickly push users toward increasingly extreme material. At the same time, extremist ecosystems have become more decentralised, with content produced by loosely connected networks and subcultures rather than formal organisations. A key challenge for security services is distinguishing online posturing and extreme rhetoric from genuine intent to commit violence.

Another major development is the increasing involvement of minors. More young people are being flagged for extremist activity, often related to incitement rather than concrete attack planning. While many lack the capability to act in the short term, these online youth networks pose longer-term risks if left unaddressed. Overall, terrorism is becoming more individualised, with blurred motives, fragmented ideologies, and a stronger role for personal grievances and fascination with violence itself. Fewer large-scale attacks do not mean the threat has disappeared, but rather that it has become more diffused and harder to predict.

Against this backdrop, counter-terrorism must adapt to a fragmented, technology-driven environment. This includes addressing online harms, strengthening platform accountability at the European level, investing in digital literacy and resilience, and maintaining strong international cooperation in an increasingly unstable geopolitical

context. ICCT remains a key leading partner in the Dutch and international CT policy space, providing tailored expert advice and research on these evolving threats.

## Adapting to Change: How CT Policy and Practice are Evolving

Early experiences with heavily repressive counter-terrorism approaches highlighted the limits of purely legal and security-driven responses to CT. This led to the conviction that counter-terrorism required a deeper understanding of root causes, pathways into violence, and preventive options. The result was the creation of ICCT – a multidisciplinary centre designed to complement law enforcement by combining insights from terrorism studies, psychology, religion, and social sciences, with prevention and human rights placed at the forefront.

Fifteen years on, ICCT is widely seen by the CT community as having met or exceeded expectations. International partners have drawn directly on the centre's work to build national research–policy ecosystems and prevention frameworks, using ICCT as a trusted external knowledge base. From an operational perspective, its value lies in explaining the "why" behind emerging threats, helping security services recognise new patterns and translate analysis into practice. At the European level, ICCT research is used daily to brief decision-makers, identify future challenges, and interpret how EU-specific legal and institutional structures shape counter-terrorism responses.
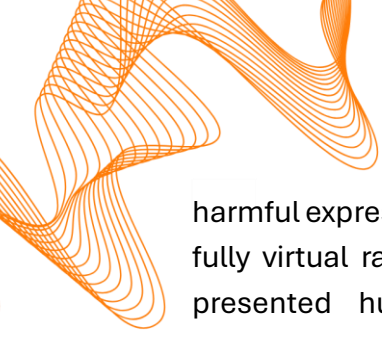
From a policy standpoint, several lessons stand out. Prevention works when it is properly funded, evidence-based, and targeted, even though its successes are often invisible and politically hard to claim. Today's extremist threat is increasingly shaped by mixed motives, fragile identities, and fascination with violence rather than coherent ideology, often involving very young individuals. Governments cannot address this alone: effective responses require cooperation across security, justice, health, education, and civil society, as well as strong research institutions like ICCT that preserve institutional memory in a fast-moving field.

Looking ahead, key challenges include post-ideological violence, the growing role of state actors and hybrid threats, and an online environment transformed by AI, disinformation, and platform incentives. These dynamics reinforce the need for ICCT – a dedicated European centre that understands both global trends and the EU's unique legal and political context and needs.

## New Research Orientations: Online Extremism, New Forms of Extremism, and Hybrid Threats

A growing challenge for CT and prevention lies in recognising and governing "implicit extremist content" online. This type of content sits in the grey zone between lawful but

harmful expression, and clearly unlawful extremist material. Online environments enable fully virtual radicalisation pathways and favour content that is concealed, coded, or presented humorously. Extremist actors deliberately use memes, pop-culture references, gaming aesthetics, misspellings, and so on to lower psychological resistance and evade automated moderation systems. These messages are amplified through emotional triggers such as outrage and injustice, visual formats that spread faster than text, fake or automated accounts, and algorithms that intensify exposure within echo chambers.

To address this, ICCT researchers have developed a set of indicators to help identify implicit extremist content, designed to support assessment rather than automatic takedown, as moderation must balance legality, necessity, and proportionality. Overly narrow moderation risks normalising violence, while overly broad approaches risk censorship and discouraging legitimate political debate. Key obstacles include definitional ambiguity, rapidly evolving tactics, human bias in moderation, and dependence on platform-controlled data.
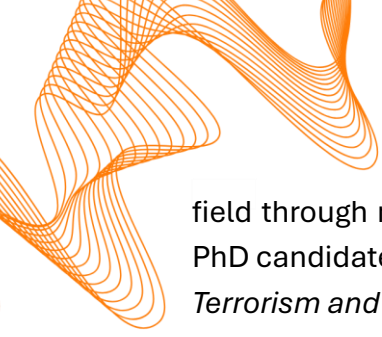
At the same time, the threat landscape is increasingly shaped by hybrid dynamics linked to geopolitics. Terrorism and extremism are now embedded within broader hybrid warfare strategies, particularly involving state actors that use sabotage, criminal networks, disinformation, and extremist proxies in deniable ways. The war in Ukraine has accelerated these trends and raises questions about post-war risks, including returning fighters and reconfigured extremist networks.

Finally, anti-government extremism has emerged as a critical mobilisation space rather than a single ideology. While opposition to government is not inherently extremist, this milieu becomes dangerous when it delegitimises democratic systems altogether. It functions as a convergence hub for conspiracy narratives, far-right ideas, pro-Russian messaging, and offline threats such as doxing, weapons possession, and lone-actor violence. Together, these dynamics underline the need for cross-domain, preventative, and politically sensitive responses.

### Award Ceremony

During the conference, ICCT presented Prof Em Dr Alex P. Schmid with the Lifetime Achievement Award for his exceptional contribution to the study of terrorism. Dr Schmid's academic career has included positions at prestigious institutions such as Leiden University (1977-1999) and the University of St Andrews (2006-2009), including as director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV). Beyond academia, he served at the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), between 1999-2005, bridging scholarship and policy at crucial moments in the post-9/11 era. Dr Schmid has had a transformative effect on the

field through mentorship and institution-building. He has supervised and guided many PhD candidates, and contributed to the development of leading journals. As co-editor of *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2006-2009) and founder of *Perspectives on Terrorism* in 2007, he contributed to building and sharing high-quality research in terrorism studies.

## Conclusion

Overall, the ICCT Annual Conference 2025 was deemed a great success by all attendees. The past, present, and future of counter-terrorism trends and research provided a rich discussion, highlighting a great scope of ICCT achievements. Despite all ongoing efforts, challenges persist but researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in attending were confident in ICCT's and its partners' ability to stay ahead of the curve, providing expert advice as needed.