



Analysis #11

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## Research, Education and CT: Different ends and common purposes

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**This brief will examine the challenges academic researchers, educators and counter-terrorism (CT) practitioners face in working towards their shared purposes of combatting and preventing terrorism. Academic research and CT practitioners constitute two sides of the same coin; sharing a common general purpose, despite having different ends. This brief will draw on the framework developed by West & Campion to highlight the importance of education as an essential element in bridging the divide between the academics and practitioners and their contribution to the achievement of CT outcomes.**

The events of 9/11 precipitated an exponential rise in CT activities generally, and an expansion of the diverse field of practitioners involved, including, but not limited to, law enforcement, intelligence, military and national security agencies and various aspects of civil society and the private sector. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) responded to the September 11 attacks by adopting, in particular, Resolution 1368, which called for increased international co-operation and implementation of measures to prevent and suppress terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Counter-terrorism evolved into an umbrella term applied to the wide array of offensive and defensive measures implemented to combat terrorism. This broad array of tactics loosely defined as CT was described by Daniel Byman as being “under-theorised and under-researched.”<sup>2</sup> Given this inexact definition of CT, the term ‘practitioners’ will be applied to those personnel employed in agencies involved in the practical application of methods associated with preventing and responding to terrorism, broadly understood. Similarly, academic research increased and expanded to examine an expansive array of factors considered to be contributing to terrorism, in an effort to better inform the policies and practices of CT.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution 1368 (unscr.com) <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1368>

<sup>2</sup> Byman, Daniel (2019): “Counterterrorism Strategies,” in: Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis N. Kalyvas (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 623.

The study of terrorism was observed by Martha Crenshaw as taking centre stage in the wake of 9/11, despite previously being regarded as “too policy-orientated to be of serious academic significance.”<sup>3</sup> Scholarly research addressing terrorism increased sevenfold in the post 9/11 era, leading to fundamental and sustained changes and improvements in understanding the manifestation and prevention of terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Despite these two enterprises sharing a common purpose, academic researchers and CT practitioners continue to work, for the most part, independently from the agencies their work supports, and for appropriately different ends. The practitioner’s responsibility is to identify, prevent and prosecute terrorism offences in line with existing policies and practices. The academic’s research purpose is to understand, investigate and analyse political violence, terrorism and CT.<sup>5</sup> The challenge within the CT environment is ensuring academic research is generating relevant and timely knowledge that can complement current practitioner practices. The disconnect between academic output and practitioner efforts is hindered by a number of factors, including the complex and evolving nature of terrorist activity, security classification of data, and the various moving parts associated with the array of agencies tasked with CT responsibilities.

The epistemic nature of academic research lends itself to uncovering knowledge and an understanding of the how and why. In this regard, terrorism research seeks to examine what terrorism is at its core, as well as who the terrorists are, and why they utilise terrorism as a strategy. This search for understanding of the world and how it impacts terrorist activity may provide insight into the who and why, without providing any explicit practical application relevant to how CT practitioners can apply this knowledge. It is at this point that the different ends of the academic and practitioner must be recognised, despite their shared common purpose.

Research as a method of collecting and interpreting knowledge is a separate and distinctly different enterprise to the teaching aspect of disseminating knowledge. Teaching is concerned with the activities focused on explaining, describing, demonstrating and exemplifying information or knowledge.<sup>6</sup> It is this act of teaching the application of academic knowledge to the actions of the practitioner that is essential to bridging the divide that exists in the CT environment. This transfer of knowledge must not be considered a one-way transaction, i.e. academic research taught to practitioners. This process should be regarded as a continual cycle of knowledge transfer between the stakeholders in the CT landscape. Practitioner knowledge and experience can be equally as valuable as carefully conducted research, especially in an environment that seeks to integrate and optimise all perspectives. Using the 3C’s framework: context, capability and connectivity, we will examine the value of increased connectivity and cohesion across the broader CT community.

The definitions surrounding terrorism and CT remain a highly disputed and analysed aspect of both terrorism studies and international and national security policies. This is just one example of how ‘context’ can be critical, and, through research and teaching, can assist the CT practitioner in understanding the ecosystem in which they operate. Context explains the circumstances, background or conditions that exist or have impacted an event or situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Crenshaw, Martha (2004): “Terrorism Strategies and Grand Strategies” in Cronin, Audrey Kurth, and James Mahoney Ludes, eds. *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Brian J. Phillips (2021): How Did 9/11 Affect Terrorism Research? Examining Articles and Authors, 1970–2019, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1935889

<sup>5</sup> Levi West & Kristy Campion. “Teaching terrorism and practitioners: context, capabilities, and connectivity in counter-terrorism knowledge and networks”, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, April 2021. Vol 16, No 1, 75-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2021.1889018>

<sup>6</sup> Isola Rajagopalan. “Concept of Teaching.” *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v7i2.329>

The perspective of the context must be considered and examined to reduce the inherent biases that may have formed as an unconscious aspect of human nature and learning, which can effect a contentious and emotive issue such as CT. A lack of understanding of cultural or historical circumstances can create a unidimensional lens through which threats and responses are translated and interpreted. The Western post 9/11 lens demonstrates this myopic view of terrorism and terrorist activity as an exclusively Middle Eastern orientated problem. Challenging assumptions, explaining empirical distinctions, and encouraging critical discourse around the who, what and why of terrorism can be difficult, especially given the impact that imagery of the twin towers continues to hold for western audiences. University-based research and teaching can provide a crucial counterbalance to misguided or ill-informed analyses and can assist practitioners in developing a capability to counter these themselves.

The development of an understanding of context regarding terrorism issues can be demonstrated through historical disputes or grievances that have continued into the contemporary era such as the Israel/Palestine conflict. The contextualisation of terrorism and CT historically is an essential element to understanding not only the motivations, objectives and strategies used by terrorist organisations, but also the strengths, limitations, and consequences of counter terrorism practices, policies and legislation.<sup>7</sup> The understanding of historical context to inform contemporary responses is a key benefit of combining research and education to inform CT policies and practices. Equally, the contextualisation of the strategies, techniques and capabilities of the myriad of government and non-government practitioners is vital in respect to academic research, and, thus, for education having a comprehensive and informed perspective from which to transfer this knowledge.

The importance of an informed perspective is vital given the diversity of political, cultural, religious, and ideological complexities associated with terrorism and, thus, CT. The changing and evolutionary nature of terrorism requires not only contextual knowledge and understanding, and contextually informed analysis, but also the capability to identify, collect and apply that knowledge in the real world.<sup>8</sup> Understanding of operational or organisational capability is an essential element in understanding the scope or limitations available to implementing CT measures. The divide between research and practitioners is not merely the expectation of different ends, but of constraints that empirical research is unable to overcome. Academic researchers that provide not only an understanding of the world, but also the means to change it are constrained by their ability to expedite the processes of having research published or actioned by the relevant practitioners. Similarly, a practitioner with academic and practitioner expertise in counter-terrorism and operational strategy may meet the conditions of 'capability' as an individual, but have no ability to effect systemic organisational or legislative change.

Capability to effectively counter terrorism at all levels benefits from scholarly research and practitioners' ability to contextualise a threat, but must further overcome the constraints imposed by a functional democratic society. The use of vehicles and IED's as weapons is a proven terrorist strategy that has been adapted in response to CT measures introduced into society. As research identifies trends and practitioners implement measures, terrorist capabilities adapt accordingly. This fluidity of modus operandi requires the same mindset to be employed in countering these measures. The use of environmental and structural barriers in crowded places or high-risk locations or infrastructure such as sport stadiums has proven to be a deterrent to various terrorism efforts.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Levi West & Kristy Campion. "Teaching terrorism and practitioners: context, capabilities, and connectivity in counter-terrorism knowledge and networks", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, April 2021. Vol 16, No 1, 75-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2021.1889018>

The use of vehicles as a weapon has proven to be an effective terrorist strategy, either to run down mass gatherings of pedestrians as seen in the Nice terror attack in 2016, or to house improvised explosive devices (IED's) as demonstrated by Anders Breivik's 2011 attack against government buildings in Oslo.<sup>9</sup> Evidence based CT strategies including bollards, high visibility policing and CCTV are all successful measures, however, these mass securitisation features run the risk of creating a state of permanent anxiety, loss of privacy and the feeling of living in a police state.<sup>10</sup> There is a delicate and difficult balance that modern democratic societies face in creating a safe, yet tolerant society in the age of terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Any stagnancy created by societal and national security complacency can cause a pendulum effect, whereby the farther we are away from the immediate fear from an act of terrorism, the less capacity and focus is dedicated towards preventing that threat. The knee jerk reaction, or movement of the pendulum from one extreme to another was exemplified by the response after 9/11, whereby national security was prioritised as the first order of business, dedicating mass resources towards containing that threat.<sup>12</sup> The United States' military and national security response dedicated billions of dollars toward equipping practitioners with operational and intelligence capabilities, creating dedicated agencies for the purpose of preventing terrorist attacks. As the perceived immediate threat of terrorism has been foreshadowed by other societal issues, and the prioritisation of great power competition, the pendulum is swinging further away, education programs, research funding and operational / practitioner capabilities are re-tasked or reduced.

The pendulum metaphor can be used to represent the shifting nature of terrorist threats. The research, education and CT capabilities developed since 9/11 have had a focus on the Jihadist threat. The rising threat to Western democratic societies has pivoted in response to the increasing prevalence of extreme right wing (XRW) attacks. The Capitol Hill insurrection, the influx of anti-government activity worldwide in the wake of Covid-19 measures, and the increased diversity of idiosyncratic actors emerging because of these conditions requires a shift in focus by the national security apparatus. This shift must also adapt, re-educate, and re-equip our understanding of the context and capability. Universities, through their research and teaching programs, are adapting to this changing threat environment and can provide substantial assistance to CT organisations and agencies in understanding these changes.

The transnational connectivity that is being exploited by various extremist movements is the same connectivity that is required by CT focused research, education and CT practitioners. The connectivity element of the 3C's framework applies to not only individuals or organisational stakeholders, but to the international community in the battle against terrorism. For example, Israeli intelligence was disseminated to Australian national security agencies and instrumental in the investigation of a failed terror attack of an Etihad flight departing from Sydney in 2017.<sup>13</sup> International networks preventing the flow of funds offshore to finance terrorist organisations, or the international identification and proscription of emerging terrorist organisations are all aspects of CT connectivity. Building and reinforcing networks of practitioners, researchers, and educators is central to the ongoing capacity of counter-terrorism policies and practices remaining at the leading edge of the threat environment.

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**9** Annelis Pauwels, "Prevention of Gun, Knife, Bomb and Arson-based Killings by Single Terrorists" in The Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness, July 2021, Chapter 22 pages 678 - 703 ICCT, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/03/Handbook-Ch-22-Pauwels-Prevention-of-Gun-Knife-Bomb-and-Arson-based-Killings-1.pdf>

**10** Amy Batley, "Counterterrorism Citizens" and the Neurotic City", Conflict and Society: Advances in Research, 2021, Volume 7, Issue 1, 78-95

**11** Richard Matthew and George Shambaugh. "The Pendulum Effect: Explaining Shifts in the Democratic Response to Terrorism". Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy, 2005, Volume 5, No 1 pg 223- 233. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2005.00068.x>

**12** Ibid

**13** Andrew Zammit, "Operation Silves: Inside the 2017 Islamic State Sydney Plane Plot." CTC Sentinel. April 2020, Vol.13 Issue 4. Operation Silves: Inside the 2017 Islamic State Sydney Plane Plot – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (usma.edu), <https://ctc.usma.edu/operation-silves-inside-the-2017-islamic-state-sydney-plane-plot/>

By recognising the shared purposes of research, education and CT practitioners we ensure that as terrorism evolves, we have the capability to understand the complexities of the threat, and, as such, can continue to develop informed policies and procedures to counter those threats. The global nature of Jihadi terrorism has created significant increases in national capability and capacity; however, we must ensure that we have the expertise garnered from research to identify emerging threats. Academic research holds little value if the knowledge is unable to be transferred into the concepts and ideas of students and practitioners. It is this connectivity between each element that is vital to not only preventing acts of terrorism, but to preventing societal hate and bias from becoming normalised, and, thus, developing into an existential threat to democratic societies. Universities have a vital role to play in assisting in the understanding of the context in which terrorism takes place; developing and strengthening the capability to analyse and understand terrorist threats, and in building and reinforcing the networks that cooperate in ongoing efforts to counter terrorism and defend the shared values of liberal democratic states.

## **About the Author**

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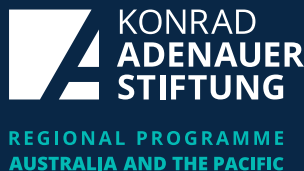
### **Kristy Milligan**

Sgt Kristy Milligan VA (Ret) was a member of the New South Wales Police Force for 16 years until 2021. Kristy completed her Masters of Terrorism and Security Studies with Distinction through the Australian Graduate School of Policing, Charles Sturt University and will begin her PhD in 2022. Her PhD, with Victoria University, Melbourne, will focus on the evolution of symbolism in the XRW digital era. Her other areas of research include XRW idiosyncratic actors, including the Sovereign Citizen Movement, and symbolism in terrorist propaganda. Kristy has contributed to research on the exploitation of extremism during the Covid pandemic, and presented the paper's findings to the 2021 AVERT symposium. She presented to CSU's 2021 Threat Briefing series and the AFP's CT Investigators Program, discussing the role of symbolism in terrorism and extremism. She is combining her operational and academic knowledge to create professional development programs on terrorism and extremism. Kristy is currently involved in the development of technology designed to aid law enforcement and government agencies in combating terrorism and extremism.



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