

# *Onderzoek naar terrorisme, extremisme en contraterrorisme*

EEN EERSTE SCAN VAN HET ONDERZOEKSVELD

Summary

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# Summary

## Introduction

In the coming years, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) intends to commission state-of-the-art studies in the areas of cyber security, (counter)terrorism and extremism, and crisis management. These state-of-the-art studies are part of a programme focusing on the realization of an NCTV-wide research agenda. The aim of this programme is to lay the foundation for a more intensive cooperation between the NCTV and science, in order to:

1. Identify and eliminate possible gaps (or blind spots) in the NCTV's knowledge.
2. Identify possible gaps (or blind spots) in scientific knowledge, prompting the NCTV to programme research in these areas to stimulate scientific development.
3. Stimulate scientific debate (and specialisation) in the areas important to the NCTV and provide a focus for it. The goal is a higher degree of effectiveness, efficiency and timeliness regarding the answering of future research questions of the NCTV.

The present report relates to (counter)terrorism and extremism. To establish its future research agenda, it is important for the NCTV to gain proper insight into the existing knowledge about (counter)terrorism and extremism. The study will consist of two phases. The present report only pertains to phase 1. The goal of this phase is to carry out a first scan of the research fields of (counter)terrorism and extremism, of the subjects under discussion there, the subjects that may be deserving of more attention and the status of the literature.

In phase 2, we will explore the literature more closely by conducting one or more literature studies. For this reason, phase 1 will result in concrete, delineated research questions that will be answered during phase 2 by means of a literature study. The present study has been conducted by the Verwey-Jonker Institute. While doing so, this Institute has bundled knowledge and expertise about (counter)terrorism and extremism through a cooperation with the International Centre for Counterterrorism (ICCT).

## Research questions

During this first phase of this state-of-the-art about the field of (counter)terrorism and extremism, we have answered the following four research questions and accompanying subquestions:

1. Which subjects in the area of (counter)terrorism and extremism are topical within the scientific research field (both national and international)?
2. Based on the answer to question 1, which research questions emerge for the literature study in phase 2?
3. How can these research questions be examined during phase 2?
4. Do the research questions fall under the domain described by the NCTV?

## Set-up and execution of the study

The study consists of many different activities, which have mostly been carried out sequentially. We have started with the literature scan, to look at international and national scientific literature. We have limited the search to literature published between the years 2000 and 2018. Key words for the search in the literature scan were *terrorism*, *extremism* and *counterterrorism*. In total, we have found 1,443 publications to serve as the first scan for this study. Of these 1,443 publications, 486 studies relate to the search terms for terrorism, while 552 relate to the search terms for extremism and 423 studies relate to the search terms for counterterrorism.

Next, we have asked the experts to anonymously fill in a first survey with their reflections on the first findings from the literature scan. We have also asked them for their personal insights with respect to the research fields of terrorism, extremism and counterterrorism (n=6). We have processed the answers generated by the survey and fed them back to the same group of experts in the second survey (n=2). Subsequently,

we have presented the findings from the survey and the literature scan to experts in an expert meeting (n=2). Our primary goal was to reach a consensus by means of the expert meeting, but due to the low response this proved impossible. As an alternative, we have approached two additional experts individually and asked them for a reflection by telephone.

### The topical subjects in the research fields of terrorism, counterterrorism and extremism

Based on a synthesis between our research results from the literature scan and the findings from the experts, we have come to a selection of subjects that are topical within the research field of terrorism, extremism and counterterrorism. Themes that have been studied extensively, - especially after the attacks of 2001 -, mainly relate to religion and ideology. The literature study and our discussion about it with experts show that there is a lot of literature available (and necessary) to explain the causes and indicators of terrorism and extremism.

The literature in the research fields of terrorism and extremism mainly deals with the characteristics of both victims and perpetrators. Publications examine, for instance, the effects of terrorism on society and the impact of terrorism at an individual level, such as traumas and stress. Studies that focus on suspects, convicts and perpetrators look at sociological and personal characteristics, motives why people are attracted to or, just the opposite, distance themselves from radical groups or ideas, as well as contextual factors that should be considered when terrorism and extremism are examined.

Moreover, the results of the literature scan and discussion with experts show that the influence of religion on terrorism and extremism constitutes an important topic within the research field. The literature pays much attention to the religious influences on terrorist motives of people or terrorist activities of organizations.

Furthermore, in the research field of extremism we see that much attention is paid to the relation between radicalization as a *process* and extremism as a *phenomenon*. Several studies point out the fact that extremism can lead to terrorism, resulting in damage disruptive to society and large groups of people being stricken with fear. The experts emphasise, however, that we should see these phenomena independently of each other. They observe that it is of utmost importance for the research field to carry out studies with a longer duration on the significance of religion for terrorism and extremism. Not only as a function for identity, the mobilisation and justification of specific decisions or actions, but also as a more substantive foundation for the use of violence or other extreme activities.

We see in the literature scan that the topical subjects in the research field of counterterrorism relate to a critical perspective on previous, current or future counterterrorism policies. In this context, the experts see the role played by the government and the way it responds as a potential catalyst for (the development of) terrorism and extremism. Terrorist activities may be caused by either an excessive or a trivialised response of the government. Research into the response of the authorities may require access to secret governmental sources, as well as contacts among target groups that are difficult to reach (such as imprisoned terrorists and/or returning foreign combatants), to study the effects and influences of counterterrorism on (potential) perpetrators.

In both the literature scan and the findings from the experts, relatively new developments such as the influence of mass media and migratory flows on terrorism and extremism are considered very important for future research. According to the experts, in addition to right-wing extremism or religious extremism, researchers should focus more on left-wing extremism. Extra attention might also be paid to special target groups, such as the position of women in radical circles.

## Underexposed themes

We have encountered several topics in the literature scan that our experts have qualified as topics that are underexposed and deserving of more attention. Our experts want more and better research into the following themes:

1. Religion as a driving force behind terrorism and extremism.
2. The quality and methods of research, including the lack of research among hard to reach target groups and the one-sided use of data sources.
3. Radicalization as a stand-alone entity, separate from terrorism.
4. Explanations, motives and trigger factors of terrorism and extremism.
5. The effect of the governmental response on terrorism and extremism.
6. The influence of new developments such as social media on terrorism and extremism.
7. The relation between migration on the one hand and counterterrorism and extremism on the other.

## Research questions for phase 2

We formulate the research questions broadly, so as to influence the scope of phase 2 as minimally as possible. They serve as points of reference. At the same time, during phase 2 researchers must be aware of the necessity of an adequate demarcation and concretisation before they can start with the literature review. The following issues play a role in the interpretation of the questions:

Firstly, in this study we use the NCTV definitions of (counter)terrorism and extremism. This results in a wide scope regarding the different studies we have inventoried for these themes. This 'phase 1' research therefore emphatically offers a first impression, a scan of existing knowledge.

Secondly, this study deals with a discrepancy between scientific research results and ideas of policymakers. The lack of multidisciplinary in scientific research makes it difficult to integrate it into policy development. This does not so much concern the different scientific perspectives, but the way in which science and policy development relate to each other. The different perspectives are not brought together by science at all, or not sufficiently, while policymakers do need that cohesion. It is sensible to take this into account, yet from a scientific perspective, we also understand the interest in giving room to other (theoretical) points of view.

Thirdly, the questions below speak of actors and the roles they play. Actors can be individual perpetrators or groups, but the government or an authority may be presented as an actor in research as well. The context or triggers that generate the behaviour may indicate that psychological or sociological aspects play a role prior to terrorist activities or extremist behaviour. Think of psychopathology, ideology or determinants of the response to cultural differences (such as intolerance of the Islam towards other cultures). For phase 2, the questions below then need to focus more on specific actors/context, triggers or motives.

Furthermore, the questions make mention of a *perpetrator* of terror. However, research might also focus on a *suspect*. Such a wider scope offers other perspectives regarding the literature questions that may be of importance.

The last point is that the questions below can be divided into themes about which there is insufficient knowledge and themes that have been researched very often, but that need an overview and structuring. In phase 2, researchers may, for instance, look for review articles that deal with the questions below. Literature research on these questions then will no longer be needed.

Ultimately, the results will provide a broad palette of topics for which a systematic literature study can take place. It is impossible to provide a ranking for this, due to the wide variety of themes and topics. The questions below are guiding for phase 2. We categorise four different, comprehensive themes with concrete research questions.

#### Micro-, meso- and macro-explanations for terrorism and extremism

The literature scan has shown that seeking explanations for terrorism and extremism occurs most often. The experts confirmed this. Yet, it turns out that the conducted research often yields unsatisfying answers. In addition, there seems to be no overview. To conclude, the scan has also shown that little is known about the flip side of the coin, that is, stopping with or refraining from terrorist activity and extremist behaviour.

1. What is known about the motives perpetrators of terrorism and extremism entertain to commit their crimes, and what keeps them from committing further crimes?
2. What is known about the personal background characteristics (for example personality, gender, culture, religion, familial factors) of perpetrators of terrorism and extremism?
3. What is known about the circumstances in which terrorist and extremist activities take place (for instance the context, trigger factors)?
4. What is known about the similarities between religious extremism and other forms of extremism? What are the similarities and differences?

#### The relation between terrorism, extremism and (counter)terrorism

We have distilled a variety of topics from the literature scan and expert meeting that receive specific attention, since they may play a role in the prevalence of terrorism and extremism. During the contacts with the experts, they also indicated that existing knowledge about the relation between extremism and terrorism is insufficiently comprehensible, which may be of importance for future research.

5. What is known about the relation between extremism, terrorism and counterterrorism?
6. What is known about the relation between migration and (counter) terrorism/extremism?
7. What is known about the role and influences of social media and the Internet with respect to (counter)terrorism and extremism?

#### Counterterrorism

In the literature scan, counterterrorism is most often characterised as the response of authorities or societies to terrorist activities. Little seems to be known about the effects of counterterrorism and about the question whether any policy is effective. The experts indicate that the effects of the different ways of responding are not comprehensible enough to make a statement about effective counterterrorist strategies.

8. What is known about the effects counterterrorism has on society, individuals or (potential) perpetrators of terrorist or extremist activities?
9. What is known about the perception of (potential) perpetrators of how society and the government anticipate and respond to extremism and terrorism?
10. What is known about the effect of the resocialization and integration of terrorist and extremist perpetrators?

#### Challenges for research on terrorism and extremism

During the execution of the literature scan and the expert meeting, beside the problem of some topics being underexposed or not receiving enough attention, still another issue emerged. Some topics do get enough attention but, from a scientific perspective, they do need to be approached in a different way. The experts have pointed out, for instance, the predominant use of non-primary sources. Also unclear is the role of the use of grey literature. In this context, we have set up several research questions around the research methodology.

11. What is known about the possibilities for combating taboos, dogmas and political sensitivities within the research field of (counter)terrorism and extremism?
12. What is known about the use and the quality of different data sources in research on terrorist and extremist perpetrators?
13. What is known about the implementation or the ignoring of policy recommendations from earlier research on (counter)terrorism and extremism?
14. What is known about the implementation or the ignoring of recommendations from earlier research on (counter)terrorism and extremism for the benefit of future research?

In part, the questions mentioned above are suitable for a literature study, yet at the same time, they present quite a few challenges when it comes to laying the foundation for methodologically sound statements. Both the literature scan and the input from experts indicated that many publications and studies 1) are not based on primary data; 2) sometimes are of a questionable methodological quality; and 3) do not always include enough replication studies to make sound statements possible (for instance as a result of political sensitivity, taboos or complexity).

## The NCTV domain

The three main question of the NCTV on which we reflect in the context of our findings from the earlier research questions 1 and 2 are, in brief:

1. What are (the trends in) the nature, seriousness and magnitude of the (present and potential) threats of extremism and terrorism?
2. What are the costs and benefits of the methods, techniques and technologies to deal effectively and efficiently with the threats of extremism and terrorism?
3. In this context, what are both the required and the available capacities of the government and society?

The research questions we have formulated deal in majority with the first two research questions of the NCTV. Our research questions mostly relate to the trends in the nature, seriousness and magnitude of the present and potential threats of extremism and terrorism. There is an overlap with research questions relating to explanatory factors for terrorism and extremism. By far, most of the research questions fall within the NCTV domain, when we speak of the cognitive and moral framework of the actors involved (such as ideology, objectives and motivation).

Furthermore, several of the research questions we have formulated relate to the costs and benefits of methods, techniques and technologies for effectively and efficiently dealing with threats of terrorism and extremism (question 2). The main concerns behind this question are the effects and consequences of counterterrorism for potential perpetrators, the government's response to terrorist or extremist activities, and the effects of this response on terrorism, extremism and counterterrorism policy. Especially important is the adverse effect the actions of the government may have on envisaged and potential actors. Issues such as required or available intentions, capacities or opportunity have not explicitly come up in our study. The question about the way in which we may succeed in reintegrating and resocializing people with a terrorist, extremist background can take this up.

To conclude, our study shows that explicit attention is paid to the methodology and quality of research, the accessibility of (classified) information, and the taboos, dogmas and political sensitivities that exist in the research field, - matters which fall outside of the NCTV domain. Remains the question whether these questions are interesting enough to include in phase 2 as well. We deem it wise to do so because, in our view, the research questions pertaining to these matters (11 to 14) may be of additional value in the determination of the NCTV's research agenda. For phase 2, our advice is to consider the research questions, guided by the introduced disclaimer, for the systematic literature study during that phase.



## Colofon

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Het Verwey-Jonker Instituut heeft in opdracht van het WODC de eerste fase van het onderzoek uitgevoerd naar de actuele stand van zaken van de kennis op het gebied van terrorisme, extremisme en contraterroreisme. De bevindingen uit dit rapport dienen als bouwstenen voor de volgende, tweede fase van het onderzoek. Aanleiding van het onderzoek was de wens van de NCTV om op een drietal terreinen, crisisbeheersing, cybersecurity en terrorisme, extremisme en contraterroreisme, in twee verschillende fasen onderzoek te laten uitvoeren. De NCTV wil een omvattend overzicht krijgen over de laatste stand van zaken op deze terreinen. Met deze onderzoeken wordt beoogd een basis te leggen voor een intensievere samenwerking tussen de NCTV en de wetenschap.

Dit onderzoek heeft aan de hand van een literatuurscan, twee surveys, een expertmeeting en twee individuele gesprekken met experts gekeken naar welke onderwerpen op het gebied van terrorisme, extremisme en contraterroreisme spelen binnen het wetenschappelijk onderzoeksveld, de onderbelichte onderwerpen die wellicht meer aandacht verdienen, alsmede welke onderzoeksvragen naar voren komen die in fase twee door middel van literatuuronderzoek beantwoord kunnen worden.