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MAKING SENSE OF RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

Edited by
Mitja Sardoč



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An Interview with Rik Coolsaet

The attacks on 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' have brought to the forefront problems previously either compartmentalized in specialized courses on intelligence and security studies or at the very fringes of scholarly interest. Are there any issues that contemporary discussions on radicalization and violent extremism have neglected or even ignored?

The 9/11 attacks have stimulated the research on terrorism just as the upsurge of political violence did in the 1960s. Then, the simultaneous advent of national liberation movements in the Third World, urban guerrilla movements in Latin America, the Basque and Irish republican turns to violence, student protests, and violent left-wing groups in the West reinvigorated the interest in addressing the old question of why people choose violence in the pursuit of their political objectives.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 gave terrorism studies a renewed boost, surpassing the 1970s–1980s era in academic frenzy and scholarly output. But influenced by the impression that the world was confronted with a whole new type of terrorism, the new generation of terrorism researchers (fortunately not all) mostly neglected to pay any attention to what their predecessors had explored in the previous era of terrorism research. This has been particularly the case with the current emphasis on the micro-level of individual processes leading to terrorism. Many scholars of the 1970s and 1980s subscribed to the view that terrorism could not be studied in isolation from its political and social context. In those days, most scholars in the field would agree that terrorism was the result of a complex interplay of factors that defied easy answers.

The tendency to decontextualize individual behaviour that is present in a number of contemporary terrorism studies is definitely a step backwards compared to that earlier broad consensus that joining and bonding in a terrorist group does not happen in a void. But then another major difference with the pioneer years of the 1960s–1980s, one we can undoubtedly qualify as positive, compensates for this emphasis on individual processes. In the earlier era, the study of terrorism was essentially the work of political scientists. Nowadays, a wider pool of scholars with different academic backgrounds is involved, leading to more solid research methodologies – even if we still have

not come up with a real consensus on the old and basic question of why terrorism occurs. But will we ever?

What have been the most important changes in the study of violent extremism and terrorism in general since 9/11 and the advent of the 'War on Terror'?

The concept of 'radicalization'. This is undoubtedly the major conceptual innovation in the current phase of terrorism studies. The concept of radicalization in relation to terrorism has no long-standing scientific pedigree and it wasn't part of the counterterrorism toolbox. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it started to be loosely used by European police and intelligence officials as a synonym of 'anger' among youngsters in immigrant communities. What exactly was the source of this anger? Finding an answer to this question became all the more urgent after the terrorist attacks of March 2004 in Madrid, which killed 193 people. European Commission officials were acutely aware that without tackling the 'root causes' of this anger European societies risked being undermined by a growing polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims, between natives and migrant communities.

The questions that the concept of radicalization were supposed to address were altogether not different from the 'root causes' question in the pioneer years of terrorism studies. But after the 9/11 attacks, EU officials hesitated to use the words 'root causes', since these could be interpreted as condoning certain terrorist acts. They thus seized the opportunity offered by the emerging notion of 'radicalization', judging it to be more neutral than 'root causes'. They were evidently aware of the intricate, interlinked and complex nature of the issues involved, and the absence of satisfying answers. They also did realize that it was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon at the intersection of individual pathways and a societal context. The effort was thought to be rewarding, though if one could succeed in understanding how these sequences worked, so it was assumed, it might be possible to devise adequate strategies to extract individuals (or groups, for that matter) from radicalization and thus turn them away from terrorism. Officials deliberately pushed for academic research to help them sort these things out.

By the end of 2005 radicalization had become the holy grail of European counterterrorism and it began its global journey, influencing scholarly research and governmental policies worldwide.

With hindsight, it seems obvious that it was born as a political construct. The concept has been less helpful at explaining individual motivations than its European advocates envisaged in 2004. Some two decades after its official adoption and notwithstanding its widespread usage, radicalization remains a sloppy notion, ill-defined, complex, and controversial. The same questions are still being asked today: What exactly do we understand by radicalization? What are its drivers? How do we reverse or stop it? Are radical ideas a conveyor belt to radical action? How does religion relate to it exactly? And, very important, how applicable are the result of radicalization studies to other, non-religious forms of extremism and terrorism?

The 'War on Terror' has also been associated with 'helicopter money' thrown at research and academic institutions by governments and their agencies. To what extent has this strategy been successful and what have been its main shortcomings?

It is certainly correct that the post-9/11 has set in motion an avalanche of public money into terrorism research, many times superior to the amounts made available in the earlier terrorism epoch of the 1960s–1980s. However, I would hesitate to confirm that this has resulted in a corresponding breakthrough in our understanding of terrorism and political violence. But we certainly did learn a thing or two.

The huge increase in funding, the massive output of scholarly studies and the availability of more hard data and primary sources than ever before (through interviews, intercepted communication and social media analyses, testimonies of (former) terrorists, courtroom documents, journalistic accounts, and statistical evidence) have made it possible to test the exploratory insights and hypotheses of the early days of terrorism research. The frameworks we now use have become less impressionistic.

The myriad radicalization studies produced since 2004 have confirmed that involvement in terrorism is indeed foremost a bonding process, a socialization and mobilization process, as my colleague Alex Schmid observed some years ago. In this process, group dynamics (kinship and friendship bonds) are more important than ideology (even if we continue to busily discuss the exact role ideology plays in this process). Our understanding has deepened of what happens to individuals once they get involved in such a process that can ultimately result in terrorism. We have a more detailed understanding of the dynamics in the process, which are quite similar to other forms of socialization into deviant behaviour, like gangs or delinquency.

But as a research community we have not yet fully come to grips with the observation that this process does not necessarily involve a lengthy process. Jihadi plots by small hubs and so-called lone actors alike, in particular from 2015 onwards, have indeed challenged earlier assumptions that the socialization process always needed time to mature into action. A number of the plotters literally jumped from drug trafficking and petty criminality or living a normal life into a jihadi plot without any protracted process of radicalization. Moreover, not all individuals follow the same trajectory into violence. Often it does not resemble a logical and staged process of successive steps.

Since there are so many specific trajectories, involving different sets of factors, different individual timelines, different triggers, I would readily admit, as some critics already did early on, that the scientific nature of the concept of radicalization has been overstated. As a result, the exact sequence of interventions to stem an individual to slide into extremism and violence – the so-called deradicalization – should be viewed with great caution.

The avalanche of money zooming in on radicalization has contributed to making it a self-sustaining concept. It has created an industry on itself. New departments have been created. New jobs and new careers opportunities have

been made available. If so much money and effort are being spent on it and so many researchers are working on it, then radicalization has to be a topic worth the scholarly and political attention. Duplication of research has been unavoidable, as well as copy-paste projects and a certain single-mindedness, a *pensée unique*. We are still producing a huge amount of studies on jihadi terrorism, while the threat has become much more diverse and multifaceted. It takes time to redirect a tanker...

Another unfortunate side effect of the funding bonanza has been the emergence of charlatans offering instant solutions to complex problems. Authorities have been repeatedly approached by consultants and wannabee experts proposing one-size-fits-all projects aimed at deradicalizing individuals and groups. They promised guaranteed success, shedding complex local dynamics and bypassing the arduous and painstaking work of first-line practitioners and youth workers in the field. As a condition for continued funding, the latter have sometimes even been forced to reframe their ongoing social work so as to fit in the newly coined radicalization idiom.

A follow-up question: contemporary scholarship on radicalization and violent extremism has been marked by an expansion of interest from disciplines as diverse as political science, criminology, psychology, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy etc. How would you evaluate the 'emancipation' of these issues from the exclusive domain of the security and intelligence 'industry'?

Three points are worth making here. It is true that both in the United States and in Europe the security industry was originally the largest beneficiary of the rapidly increasing funding for terrorism-related research after the 9/11 attacks. But I remember that soon after the Madrid and London attacks in 2004 and 2005, respectively, European officials deliberately started to seek a better balance in research funding, by insisting on increased funding for human sciences within the European Security Research Programme. With hindsight, the parallelism between this effort and the rapid emergence of radicalization as the primary concept for understanding terrorism seems obvious.

The second point would be that the study of terrorism never has been the exclusive domain of the security services nor the intelligence community. As such, there has been no 'emancipation'. As I said earlier, terrorism studies have originally been dominated by political scientists, though some psychologists too had entered the field in the 1960–1980 era. But the number of scholars involved was extremely limited, compared to today's terrorism studies community. Already then, scholars were aware that the study of terrorism needed a genuine multidisciplinary approach, since they had come to realize that terrorism was the result of a complex interaction between the societal context, psychological considerations and group dynamics. The broadening of the field to a wide array of scholarly and academic disciplines is thus a very welcome development.

The last remark concerns the relationship between scholarly work and the security and intelligence services. A real divide exists here, since both worlds

have different horizons, objectives and methods. But at least in some European countries both worlds have come to appreciate the added value the other can bring to their own work. And so police, intelligence and academia have launched cooperative projects for bridging the divide. In some countries, these efforts have led to enhanced trust and cooperation between these unlikely partners, while in others suspicion persisted.

Alongside some of the 'standard' problems associated with terrorism, e.g. 'the problem of double standards' ('one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'), this area of scholarly research struggles with various problems of implementation at the policy level. What are the most pressing problems and challenges associated with policies aimed to tackle violent extremism?

Whether we like it or not, academic research has a build-in tendency to 'ivory-towerism'. The need for implementation or how to make scholarly results usable in daily practice is not always a leading motivation among academics. That is true for research on terrorism and radicalization as well. One challenge flows directly from my previous answer: how to dissipate the mistrust between academics and the security and intelligence community? In my own experience such a dialogue offers a constant reality check for the former and allows to compensate for the short-termism that is prevalent among the latter.

A second challenge seems to me the need for flexibility. Most of the research on radicalization has been conducted against the background of the wave of jihadi terrorist attacks since the 1990s. But while terrorism has become much more diverse, research is still very much dominated by an overall Islamism bias. To be fair, leading scholars are now turning their attention to other forms of violent extremism, in particular right-wing extremism (that European intelligence services already started to warn about since 2015). To what extent research has been Islamist-specific and how can its results (including deradicalization policy recommendations) be made useful to address new emerging extremisms)?

The third challenge is the hardest one to meet: how to overcome the gap with public opinion and political discourse on the issue of radicalization and terrorism? Ever since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a tendency among policy makers to decry scholarly work explaining motivations of terrorists and root causes of terrorism as a way of condoning terrorism. This is true in both the U.S. and Europe. (As a reminder: this was also the case in the 1960s–1980s epoch.) Notwithstanding the sometimes fierce scholarly debates on radicalization, there exists a broad but real consensus on the complexity and multifaceted nature of the process, which stands in stark contrast to the sloppy everyday use of the notion in public and political use. In my opinion, scholars need to get involved in public debates in order to try to reduce as much as possible the partisan hijacking of these complex societal challenge.

As you write in your paper 'EU Counterterrorism Strategy: Value Added or Chimera', '[t]he main characteristic of the counterterrorism approach in Europe has been to consider terrorism a crime, to be tackled through criminal law'. What are the main shortcomings and problems associated with this approach to terrorism?

This observation referred to the pre-9/11 European counterterrorism policies. European states experienced waves of terrorism campaigns before the jihadi era. The threat was largely domestic and the preferred approach consisted in dealing with it through criminal law. But the 9/11 attacks led to a thorough rethink of European counter-terrorism policies in two distinctive ways: a whole new focus on prevention and the waning of the once clear divide between domestic and external security.

Before 9/11 and, more specifically, before the 2004 and 2005 attacks in Europe, prevention was not part of the toolkit of counterterrorism. To be more precise: 'prevention' was solely understood as 'hard' prevention of attacks through police and intelligence work. The 2004 Madrid attacks prompted the EU and its Member States to break new ground in their counterterrorism approach by delving into the mechanisms underpinning the recruitment of individuals into terrorism. The first Council meeting following these attacks called for a thorough assessment of 'the factors which contribute to support for, and recruitment into, terrorism'.

By taking this route, the EU entered uncharted territory. This search for root causes and underlying factors not only brought the EU into the realm of socio-economic prevention, a policy domain that lay by and large within Member States' competence. But also, and more importantly, by linking prevention and security with the ultimate ambition of draining the breeding ground for terrorism, counterterrorism was pushed far beyond its traditional security-centred tools of policing, intelligence and law enforcement. Counterterrorism now became a whole-of-government effort, encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, and stitching it all together in a broadened security agenda.

Only with the passing of time would the implications of blurring the once-obvious dividing line between prevention and security, and their respective constituencies, become clear. It led to ambiguities and unintended consequences that still bedevil counterterrorism, prevention and community relations alike.

The second reworking of the European counter-terrorism policies involved another blurring of an existing dividing line, the one between internal and external security. Following 9/11, and similar to the U.S., the EU saw terrorism as an external threat, whereby foreign recruiters sought to brainwash and mobilize European youngsters to join foreign theatres. But then, security and intelligence agencies soon started to assess the threat as essentially homegrown. Joining terrorism was increasingly seen as an autonomous, self-propelled process, without direct foreign involvement. International events – and the Iraq war in particular – increasingly appeared to function both as a booster and a source of inspiration for wannabee terrorists. By 2005 the terror threat within the EU was predominantly seen as a home-grown challenge and threat.

I remember the feeling of perplexity and bewilderment within the military and diplomatic community when in June 2004 the European Council asked the Political and Security Committee [the permanent EU body where the ambassadors of the member states discuss security and defense issues] to elaborate upon the specific contribution the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) could render in the fight against terrorism. Member states were then genuinely divided over the issue whether the EU should engage ESDP resources for direct military intervention against terrorist activity. Some were adamantly opposed to such undertaking, whereas others are deeply involved in military counter-terrorism operations, in Afghanistan in particular.

Time passing and as a result of the ever increasing international nature of the jihadi threat, this reluctance to undertake military counter-terrorism operations waned. EU countries joined the U.S. 'War on Terror', in Afghanistan and other theaters. Some EU member states even took the lead in such operations, in particular from the 2011 Libya operations onwards.

In your introductory essay to the book Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge, you emphasize that there have been 'many transatlantic differences of opinion on terrorism and counterterrorism'. What are the main differences between the European and the American approach to tackle violent extremism and terrorism in general?

Transatlantic differences in addressing terrorism were much more pronounced in 2001 than they are today. I already mentioned the American global 'War on Terror' vs. the European criminal law approach. I also referred to prevention and root causes, the Europeans started to focus on from 2004–05 onwards. At that time, 'root causes' were very much a taboo word in the Bush administration, "evil" being the only acceptable explanation for the attacks of September 11, as *The Washington Post* wrote at the end of 2002. The Americans considered 'radicalization' a quintessential European problem and not an American one, opposing the so-called European marginalization of their Muslim communities with the successful American integration of Muslims, often living in affluent suburbs rather than poor ethnic enclaves as they did in Europe, so it was argued.

It wasn't until the arrival of the Barack Obama Administration that differences gradually eroded. In 2009, young Americans of Somali descent living in Minneapolis went on a suicide mission in Somalia. They were soon followed by a group of American Muslims from Virginia who travelled to Pakistan supposedly to join the Taliban. This made the American counterterrorism community aware that radicalization was an American phenomenon too. This contributed to the organization of the very first EU–U.S. high-level encounter on radicalization in the premises of the European Commission in June 2010, when representatives of the relevant U.S. federal agencies, including the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Council, and community leaders met their peers from the EU, as well as from Member States. While the Europeans referred to the EU jargon

of 'radicalization and recruitment into terrorism', the Americans most often used 'violent extremism' as their preferred idiom, but still it implied that the U.S. too had now embraced the radicalization paradigm. But it never developed the extensive (local) deradicalization architecture that many EU member states put in place after 2004.

In turn, as I already mentioned, the Europeans too moved closer to the American position in joining military action in the name of counterterrorism. The positions on counter-terrorism have thus grown much closer to one another than most observers would have thought possible in 2001.

Despite the fact that in the EU's Internal Security Strategy and Action, radicalization is defined as 'a complex phenomenon in which individuals adopt a radical ideology that can lead to committing terrorist acts', the relationship between radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism is anything but unambiguous or unproblematic. Is there any distinction between these terms that is in need of further clarification?

I'm not sure we need another lengthy and unproductive search for a definition of radicalization, as was the case with the definition of terrorism that consumed so much time and energy in the 1960s–1980s.

This being said, at its inception, it was first and foremost a catch-all political construct rather than a scholarly concept. Within the academic community, it was seldom used. Starting in 2004–05, however, a wide variety of topics was being discussed under the umbrella of 'radicalization'. My colleague Peter Neumann once aptly summarized it as: 'what goes on before the bomb goes off'.

With the re-emergence of right-wing extremism, the concept of radicalization faces a new challenge. How pertinent are the results of our current models and schemes, developed with jihadi extremism and terrorism in mind, to explain a more diverse set of violent extremist movements?

Conceptually, the alternative concepts – countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) – did not fare much better. The former was the preferred idiom under the Obama Administration (and became a real mania in 2015). The latter was launched by the UN in 2015. These concepts too are usually taken for granted and considered self-evident. They are not. Like 'radicalization', no consensus definition of 'violent extremism' exists and satisfying metrics never developed. The concepts of CVE and PVE do not provide better answers to the old questions of what makes a terrorist than the concept of radicalization. Most crucially, notwithstanding these novel notions, the link between ideas and acts is still something of a black box. It is useful to remember Walter Laqueur's words, written in 1977: 'scratching a terrorist will [not] necessarily reveal an ideologue'.

Perhaps we should stop overtheorizing these concepts in the vain hope of finding definite answers for questions that were already raised at the end of the 19th century, when the international community was confronted with the anarchist terrorist wave. I'm afraid we will never find the magical formula that

explains, once and for all, and for all individuals involved, how a person turns into a terrorist.

Instead, and more modestly, we should continue to emphasize – also vis-à-vis public opinion and the polity – that nobody becomes a terrorist in a void. The decision to perpetrate a terrorist attack or to join a terrorist group is as much an individual decision as the result of the interplay of contextual factors, kinship and friendship dynamics, belief systems, and personal trajectories. These factors do not play in the same way for all individuals. Routes into terrorism are as varied as there are individuals – but all these factors need to be present for terrorism to emerge.

How to overcome the polarization of democratic societies fueled by political violence associated with ethnic and religious divisions. Has there been any governmental program that you find most successful in tackling these issues? If 'yes' which one and why?

That really is a tough question, that goes way beyond the realm of terrorism and radicalization studies.

I assume most of us would agree that political violence in general and terrorism in particular are more likely to appear in a polarized society than in a society that is at ease with itself. Polarization is part of the conducive environment that allows terrorism to emerge. But then, as Martha Crenshaw already argued in 1981, terrorism is never an automatic reaction to conditions. More is needed, as I said earlier. You need a credible offer and a feeling that this is the historic moment to engage in terrorism, there has to be a mobilizing discourse, and local mobilization hubs that bring candidates for terrorist action together.

Polarization is the result of many parallel developments within society. No silver bullet exists, and no single governmental program is able to make polarization disappear, since the state of a nation is the responsibility of each and every citizen and thus the nation as a whole.

But, of course, the polity plays an important role. It obviously makes an immense difference if a prime minister reaches out to her entire nation in an attempt to overcome division and polarization after a terrorist attack on a mosque. Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand was inspiring when she did just that after the terrorist attack in Christchurch in March 2019. President Donald Trump did exactly the opposite in January 2021. He deepened the polarization within the American nation by his fierce encouragement of his followers to storm the United States Capitol.

But the attitude and policies of the authorities are only part of the equation. Democratic societies today are prone to two conflicting impulses, or emotions, if you prefer.

Same society, two opposing emotions, two opposing remedies. Let's take the election campaigns of Obama and Trump as an illustration. It is counterintuitive to claim it, but the concerns and fears that Obama responded to in 2008 and Trump in 2016 are more similar than they are different.

Whether it was 2008 or 2016, America lived under the spell of angst and uncertainty. Many Americans felt their country was headed in the wrong direction. The economic downturn was eating away at the income of the average American, especially in areas where industry had moved away or was threatened. Working hard, sure, but at the same time having the impression of not moving forward. A significant proportion of Americans felt that it was becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet at the end of the month. The average American saw no light at the end of the tunnel, only obstacles and no one who could or would give him shelter. Washington seemed unable to answer any of that and only focused on its own concerns.

But then the paths of both presidential candidates part.

'Hard times can create mean times', the *Washington Post* once wrote. Trump played on this angst and played on resentment. Self-interest first, he proclaimed, at home and abroad. A wall – of steel and of customs tariffs – would keep American jobs in and foreigners out. Anyone who was not with him became his scapegoat. And there were many. He offered a new horizon that was to reunite polarized America: Make America Great Again.

Obama did the opposite. He sought to transcend that same angst and those same uncertainties by seeking what could connect Americans, a "new sense of common purpose," he said – a new social contract, just as his predecessor Franklin Roosevelt had done, that would protect the weakest in American society and at the same time cushion the growing anxiety among the middle class. Without a common purpose and a common horizon, a society floats to the rhythm of its contradictions.

All democratic societies are susceptible to the "every man for himself" impulse. Fear of tomorrow and the anxiety to lose what we have easily leads to resentment. But at the same time, there also exists a reservoir of support for a society based on solidarity. Common and individual interest can be bridged. Let this be the lesson learned from the Covid disaster: we are not safe until everyone is safe.

Why the 'feeling of not belonging [...] and having no future', if I somehow summarize one of the points from an interview with you on the 'no future sub-culture', remain the key drivers of violent extremism and the various phenomena associated with it?

This assessment specifically applied to the generation of European youngsters that fell under the spell of Islamic State starting in 2012. At the risk of excessive generalizing, but for the sake of clarity, two distinct groups of Europeans traveling to Syria can be distinguished. A first group comprised pre-existing kinship and friendship gangs. For them, joining Islamic State was merely a shift to another form of deviant behaviour, next to membership of street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and juvenile delinquency. But it added and opened a thrilling, bigger-than-life dimension to their way of life – indeed transforming them from delinquents without a future into *mujahedeen* with a cause.

Whereas most individuals of this group were known to the police, this was not the case for the second group. Before suddenly deciding to leave for Syria, alone or with friends and kin, the youngsters in this group didn't show any sign of deviant behaviour and nothing seemed to distinguish them from their peers. But what we now know from their life stories, one cannot fail to notice how frequently they referred to the absence of a future, and to personal difficulties they faced in their everyday life. They often mentioned earlier personal difficulties, that left them feeling stifled and discontented. Frequently, they expressed feelings of exclusion and absence of belonging, as if they didn't have a stake in society. One gets the impression of solitary, isolated adolescents, frequently at odds with family ("my parents do not understand me") and friends, in search of belonging.

Often these stories pointed to a desire to leave all this behind, to be 'someone', to be accepted, to do something 'useful'. In short, to find refuge in a more welcoming environment, where they wouldn't feel excluded, and where they would be able to finally take control of their life. They want to look up to heroes – or to be one themselves.

For neither of both groups religion was the key departure point nor the primary engine of their 'radicalization'. Most of them were no fundamentalists in the genuine sense of the word. Their acquaintance with Islam was mostly superficial and often the Qur'an and the hadith were reduced to hollow slogans, they picked up at the internet. More than any other reason, 'no future' was the essence of the youth subculture on which Islamic State's force of attraction thrived. Going to Syria was an escape from an everyday life seemingly without prospects. For those involved traveling to Syria signalled they had nothing to lose and everything to gain by joining Islamic State. To a degree al-Qaeda could never achieve, Islamic State's Caliphate exploited these feeling by offering these youngsters a once in a lifetime, instant opportunity to go from zero to hero – or so they imagined.

This is not the conducive environment that explains the re-emergence of right-wing extremist groups during the last decade. Here, the social malaise that is rooted in social and economic developments since the 1980s constitutes the crucial push factor. Rapid technological change, globalization, and migration, have led to widespread feelings of a 'world that is getting worse' (as international surveys tell us). Fears of being left behind feed the angst, and growing inequalities boost the anger. It's not so much about the 'losers of globalization' but about a deficient social security system that leaves too many unprotected, while at the same time many others seem to thrive. That mix of feelings and emotions is, once again, being politically exploited, now by radical-right populist figures and movements. Looking for culprits is standard practice in their toolkit: the elite, Muslims and migrants, the European Union.

New activist groups have emerged, linked by a common narrative that something essential and even existential is at risk and that now is the time, even the historic moment, to stand up for the defense of the West against migration, Muslims, and the Great Replacement. The elites are being accused

of complicity. Since 2015 EU intelligence services have been warning about these 'fluid groups' with 'growing confidence', showing a 'trend to arm themselves' and increasingly 'developing international contacts'.

In the West, therefore, the conducive environment for violent extremism has been dramatically altered since the heydays of jihadism and Islamic State. The face of violent extremism has become much more diverse.

The US President John F. Kennedy made an insightful observation on 'terrorism' during his Address before the General Assembly of the UN (on September 25, 1961): 'Terror is not a new weapon. Throughout history it has been used by those who could not prevail, either by persuasion or example'. To what extent this example of political rhetoric applies to contemporary cases of radicalization and violent extremism?

I would hesitate to transplant President Kennedy's words to today's terrorism landscape. In his 1962 UN address, Kennedy spoke about 'terror' (he didn't use the word 'terrorism') as the tactics to suppress people's free will, in Vietnam and Laos, but also in Eastern Europe. The culprits he accused of using terror were the communist states, in North Vietnam and the Soviet Union, but also the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, imposed by the military might of the Soviet army.

We are living in a different world now. But some things have remained unchanged. They are still governments around that use terror to oppress populations, their own and others. They are still authorities that make it a habit to accuse their political adversaries of 'terrorism' in the hope the negative connotation of that word will justify the harsh tactics they use against their opposition. Terrorism has always been and will always be intertwined with political rhetoric.

One final question: what aspects of the study on terrorism and political violence are most promising for future research? What should be the future directions in this area of scholarly engagement?

Today, most scholars and practitioners in the field assess radicalization broadly in the same way as scholars in the 1970s and early 1980s viewed terrorism: a complex interaction between personal characteristics, group dynamics, belief systems, and contextual factors. Within this broad but real consensus on the key variables that play a crucial role in radicalization leading to terrorism, different emphases co-exist, sometimes leading to febrile scholarly debates.

The future of terrorism and radicalization studies first and foremost depends on their capacity to withstand the looming counter-terrorism fatigue that has hampered policies and research alike when terrorism declined in the second half of the 1980s. We do need to keep in place the counterterrorism mechanisms that have been put in place and the research capabilities that have been built up.

Secondly, I am convinced that terrorism and radicalization research only has a future if it keeps building upon the realization that these are multifaceted and exceptionally dynamics that defy easy generalizations.

A third challenge for the field lies in the pertinence of the current models and schemes, developed with jihadi extremism and terrorism in mind, to explain a more diverse set of violent extremist movements.

Finally, bridging research and policies will remain a persistent challenge, for scholars and practitioners alike. This is all the more crucial, since we are dealing with issues that are easily hijacked for partisan purposes.