Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism:

Literature Review

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Key Points

- 'Islamist Violent Extremism' is a broad label that includes a wide range of disparate groups and movements, ranging from Shia revolutionaries to popular militias to cell-based terrorist groups such as Al Qaida.

- The majority of Sunni Islamists are non-violent – Islamism in the MENA region, for instance, is much more political than it is violent. Those that are violent have been divided into strategic (or nationalist) and utopian groups/movements. The former are territorially focused groups with Islamic values and identity. The latter seek to transform the world through violence, and draw on notions of sacredness and prophecy to frame conflicts as 'cosmic war'. Although some groups are both strategic and utopian, this is a helpful approach to conceptualising the range of and differences between Islamist violent groups.

- Ideology is important for leaders especially. Some are ideological entrepreneurs who seek to mobilise followers behind a cause. Ideology can be a factor for followers, but people in conflict situations join violent groups for a wide range of reasons – social, psychological and practical – as well as political.

- Although 'radicalisation' is accepted within government, in the academic literature it is disputed, with some arguing that it is a misleading conceptualisation. The psychological processes that draw people into violent groups are however likely to be consistent across a range of ideologies. These processes depend upon 'normal' psychological phenomena such as identity formation and the need to belong, as well as conflict phenomena such as fears of existential threat, and individual and collective trauma.

- This ideology of global, utopian, violent Islamist groups/movements is recent. It originated in the 1980s (drawing inspiration from earlier, Islamist revolutionaries) as a defensive programme. Under the pressures of repeated conflicts it became increasingly offensive. Its most recent manifestation – 'Salafi-jihadism' – came into being largely as a result of the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq.

- Although Salafi-jihadists are in many ways different – and more threatening – than other violent groups, they express their worldview through a narrative that is strikingly similar to that proposed by many other militant movements (religious and secular).

- Islamist violent extremism is increasingly seen as a symptom of governance failures. It flourishes in regions where the state is weak or has collapsed and draws strength from political, social and economic grievances. Managing the problem requires state capacity – but not repression.

- Foreign fighters are not in themselves new – but in scale and frequency, foreign participation in Islamist violent extremist groups is unprecedented. Nor are suicide attacks new – but they are similarly unprecedented in scale and frequency.

- In other respects, Islamist violent extremism shares many features with other forms of political violence.

Summary

The extent to which ideology drives people to violence is controversial: study after study has shown the importance of social rather than ideological factors. Nonetheless, violent groups spend a lot of effort explaining their aims and motivations, and ideology clearly differentiates groups.

Distinguishing between strategic and utopian groups is helpful: the former tend to be territorial (nationalist or separatist) and use violence instrumentally, the latter tend to be global or at least transnational in scope, aim to transform society, and use violence expressively. Some Islamist groups are strategic, and many non-Islamist groups are utopian. Among Islamist, utopian groups, those such as Al Qaida and its affiliates which increasingly self-identify as 'Salafist-jihadist' (also termed global jihadist) are the most significant, and are expanding: foreign fighters are not in themselves new, but the scale, frequency and intensity of transnational participation in violent Islamist groups is unprecedented. This is important as global jihadists change conflicts for the worse. However, Al Qaida has notably failed in its ambition to mobilise a global revolution and unify Islamist militancy under its own banner. This suggests that the influence of the global jihadist worldview is limited, and should be kept in perspective.

Islamist violent extremists have been inspired by an ideology developed in the 1980s for a specific purpose – defending Muslims from oppression and occupation – and which, under the pressure of repeated participation in conflicts, its adherents have adapted and made more extreme. Tactics, policies and overall aims tend to become more extreme as a result of pressures on the battlefield. However, ideology does not explain everything: these groups and movements are also the product of the pressures of globalisation, especially where these have weakened or undermined the legitimacy of repressive states. Religion is important not in terms of its contribution to ideology, but as a marker of social and political identity in the resulting struggles for resources or survival.

In emphasising the existential threat from a non-Muslim 'other', the Islamist extremist worldview is not, in fact unique, but is actually an instance of a near-universal narrative used by groups seeking to mobilise supporters to violence. More fundamentally, such 'in-group/out-group' thinking is fundamental to how humans cooperate in order to compete. The worldview may also be utopian and, in common with other religiously framed conflicts, presents a narrative of 'cosmic war', but it is not irrational. Costs and benefits, incentives and disincentives still drive behaviour in these groups – but the rewards and punishments are spiritual and also social. Altruism and mutual cooperation are key to developing and maintaining commitment, as in many other, non-Islamist groups and movements.

Utopians like the global jihadists may be less susceptible to negotiation and compromise – but this is the result of the scope of their ambition, not their religious beliefs. Many Islamist groups participate in conventional politics – some even support democracy.

Whether 'radicalisation' is the most accurate term to describe individuals moving into violence is contested, and the term is less helpful in understanding militant groups outside the West. Whereas studies of terrorism focused on the West has found no evidence of poverty or education being a major factor, there is more support in the conflict studies literature for governance and development standards, or relative deprivation, as a driver for extremist violence in non-western societies. The experience of individual or collective trauma may make individuals more at risk of involvement, and refugees/internal displaced people may be particularly vulnerable. Women, although often assumed

to be a moderating influence, may play active as well as supportive roles in violent groups, and appear to join for much the same reasons as men.

Islamist extremists do not tend to use especially novel techniques: fears that they will take to unconventional weapons have remained largely unfounded, and nor are they completely unconstrained in their tactics. However, suicide attacks – not in themselves new – are being used on a scale and frequency that is unprecedented. It is this that largely accounts for the increasing lethality of terrorism after 9/11.

Introduction and Caveat

This paper was commissioned by DFID in June 2015 as part of a project to examine the relationship between Islamist violent extremism and conflict. It is a literature review, not an analytical or policy paper. It summarises existing research into the nature of Islamist violent extremism, what makes it distinctive or new, and how it has affected or been affected by conflict. The research question was:

What is distinctive about violent Islamist extremism in conflict situations, and what features does it share with other ideologies or movements involved in conflicts? This paper examines academic work in three academic fields – terrorism studies, conflict studies, and development studies – and from a range of academic disciplines, from psychology to political science to economics. What follows therefore reflects a wide and varied range of research. Given the extent of the literature in these fields which may be relevant, this does not claim to be comprehensive. We identified potentially relevant research by consulting bibliographies, performing key-word searches of databases, and by the 'snowball method' (which simply means following up potentially references and citations as we found them in our reading).

Terrorism studies needs a particular caveat. Most terrorism studies work is recent (the volume since 9/11 eclipses everything produced before that event) and is inevitably contentious – a point illustrated by the absence of consensus on definitions of key terms, including that of 'terrorism' itself. Terrorism studies is politicised even within academia. Terrorism studies is also affected by more technical problems: data is difficult to come by, and as a result a majority of studies rely on secondary-source data, thereby creating an 'echo chamber' effect. Terrorism research is often impressionistic or merely opinionated. Finally, as with any academic domain, methodological

standards are variable but this problem is more pronounced in terrorism studies as a result of its recent emergence and the challenge of data collection. The domain suffers in particular from methodological problems of aggregation (categories such as 'terrorism' contain many, varied phenomena which are assumed to be similar but which are not), sampling (many studies 'select on the dependent variable', meaning that samples or case studies are chosen not using random or scientific methods but to prove the point), and validity (control groups are almost unheard of in the field). Where possible we have indicated if a study seems strong or weak, but these problems are widespread and only beginning to be countered with more rigorous methodology.

The review begins with a review of the theoretical literature on violent extremism and conflict in general, before examining the more specific dimensions of the problem. These dimensions are religious ideology, politics, ideology and narrative, radicalisation, identity, openness to negotiation, aims and motivations, rationality, geography and territory, homogeneity and stability, novelty (including of participants and of techniques), and scale and impact. These derive from a series of eleven hypotheses (H) and counter-hypotheses (CH) which we used to identify relevant literature:

H1:   Islamist violent groups are ultimately ideological in nature, being the violent expression of a system of ideas.

H2:   Islamist violent groups have been radicalised into believing an ideological narrative. The process of radicalisation is unique to IVE groups/movements.

H3:   Islamist violent groups are irrational, being motivated by faith, or religious doctrine, rather than by a need to maximise gains and minimise losses.

H4:   Islamist violent extremism is transnational: it does not merely spread from country to country, but is being deliberately spread by ideologues who are trying very deliberately to globalise its message and appeal.

H5:   Islamist violent groups are absolutist: they are not prepared to negotiate or surrender, and so are not susceptible to the normal processes of resolving conflicts. Islamist extremist groups do not have a history of accepting political settlements, and frequently act as spoilers.

H6:   Islamist violent extremism is a broadly stable, consistent, and homogenous phenomenon.

H7:   Its aims are different from previous actors in conflicts (e.g. to build a supra-national Caliphate, or to destroy American hegemony.)

H8:   Islamist extremist ideology legitimises methods or actions that are not legitimised in other kinds of violent extremism: Islamist violent groups use new techniques, such as weapons of mass destruction, or filmed beheadings distributed by social media.

H9:   Islamist violent extremism attracts a new and different set of actors, such as foreign fighters, whom we know have been drawn to Syria and Iraq, for example, in tens of thousands.

H10:   Islamist violent extremism works on a greater scale than other violent phenomena, as suggested by ISIL's vast forces in Syria and Iraq, more consistent with a national army than a terrorist, insurgent, or guerrilla group.

H11:   Islamist violent groups have a greater impact on civilian populations, on societies, and on governments, than other types of group. Communities and states are more vulnerable/less resilient to IVE violence.

CH1:   Islamist ideology, while frequently asserted by IVE groups, is more a justification than a cause or motivating factor.

CH2:   There is nothing unique about the process of Islamist extremist radicalisation: individuals and networks participating in IVE are drawn in by processes that are common to a range of violent extremist movements currently and historically. Islamist violent groups are motivated by traditional causes or factors such as resource competition, political or ethnic contention, sectarian divides, in-group/out-group social dynamics, and power vacuums or other forms of governance failure.

CH3:   Islamist violent groups are fundamentally rational: we just find it difficult to understand or relate to their wants.

CH4:   Conflicts involving Islamist violent groups are determined more by local conditions and contexts than transnational ones: a global and unified assault on Western governments and their allies is a fear but not a reality

CH5:   Islamist violent groups are political actors who are susceptible to negotiation. Religion is more a marker of identity for Islamist violent groups and their supporters than a causal factor in their involvement in conflict, and identity is a powerful motivating factor that can be manipulated by leaders in conflicts for more 'traditional' power objectives.

CH6:   Islamist violent groups are far from homogenous and stable: apparent similarities in aims, methods, and doctrine are merely superficial, and conceal a very broad spread. Groups are dynamic, and responds to changes in local and regional conditions.

CH7: The aims of Islamist violent groups are actually consistent with nationalist/separatist groups in recent history (e.g. state-building has been an aspiration of Zionist, Armenian, or secular Kurdish militants).

CH8: Islamist violent groups use techniques that are no different from those used by non-Islamist groups, including targeting of civilians for killing, intimidation, or forced conscription.

CH9: Islamist violent groups recruit in very similar ways to other kinds of conflict participants.

CH10: IVE groups are not unusual, let alone unique, in aiming for large-scale effects.

CH11: Islamist violence is no more or less threatening to states and communities than any other variety.

Literature Review

Violent Extremism and Conflict

Research on violent extremist groups has most often been undertaken in the field of terrorism studies. As a result, violent extremist groups are usually viewed narrowly as terrorist groups, thereby overlooking the fact that many of them are also parties to civil conflicts.

Holmer (2013) considers violent extremism to be a driver of conflict, and violent extremists as peacebuilding spoilers: violent extremist groups influence, and are influenced by the conflicts they participate in. Some current conflicts have been partly instigated by violent extremist groups, including Islamist ones, as in north-eastern Nigeria. The resolution of larger conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war, are complicated by the presence of violent extremist groups. Warfare can enable violent extremist groups to operate more easily and makes counter-terrorism (CT) and counter-violent extremism (CVE) more challenging. For example, extremist groups sometimes resort to criminal activity due to the opportunities that conflict-affected environments offer, and thus acquire a vested interest in the continuation of the conflict (Cronin, 2006). Examples of violent Islamist groups that have taken such transitions include the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Afghan Taliban. This is not, however, specific to Islamist groups and has been seen widely across the world – for example, in all of the major narco-terrorist groups in Colombia.

Violent extremist groups illustrate the greater diversity of conflict actorsthat has become apparent since the end of the Cold War. Until the 1990s, security threats were understood to be primarily directed at the state by another state. The preoccupation with the threat of 'mutually assured destruction' between the US and Soviet Union obscured threats from non-state actors (Reisman, 2003). In contrast, many post-Cold War civil conflicts have been driven by non-state armed groups including paramilitaries, criminal gangs, foreign mercenaries, disenfranchised civilians and forcibly recruited combatants, as well as state armies (Akkerman, 2009: 76). Labelled by Kaldor (2006) as "new wars", these conflicts "blur the distinction between war, organised crime and large scale violations of human rights", borrowing techniques from guerrilla warfare and insurgency/counter-insurgency. Duffield (2010: 67) describes these conflicts as "livelihood wars fought by non-state

actors on and through the modalities of subsistence […] where the endemic abuse of human rights is part of the fabric of conflict itself".

Although the newness of these wars has been debated – for example Kalyvas (2001:99) argues that "the tendency to see fundamental differences between [old and new wars] is based on an uncritical adoption of categories and labels grounded in a double mischaracterization" – this articulation of war's changing character has had a significant impact on security and development policymaking. In particular, it has sparked debates over the contribution development actors can make to conflict, resulting in Goodhand's (2006) framework of 'working around', 'working in' and 'working on' conflict which we discuss further in our section on implications below. Violent extremism offers a further challenge to conventional thinking about conflict. It arguably represents a further shift along a spectrum away from traditional, state-based conflicts towards much more fragmented and diverse groups with varying motives and drivers. The category of violent extremism itself is wide-ranging and diverse, and includes terrorist groups, insurgents, militias, and guerrillas, all with varying organisational styles from hierarchical, narrow focused groups, to broad, disorganised networks. Violent extremist groups also have varying motives, targets, demands, structures and arenas of operations. The labels conceal this range and diversity. Ganor (2008) reviewed the many typologies developed since the 1970s to understand terrorism and terrorist groups. His taxonomy (see figure 1 below), which usefully considers the full range of what we would now call violent extremism, gives a good impression of the complexity that lies under the labels.
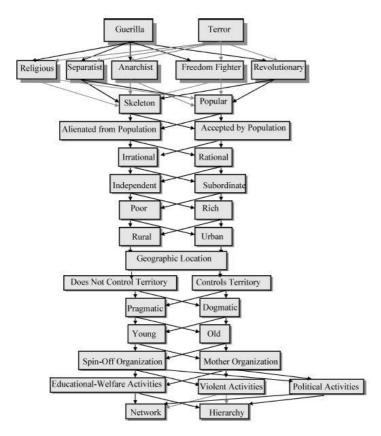
Figure 1: Ganor's (2008) Taxonomy of Terrorist Groups

Whilst recognising this complexity, drawing on our three case-studies we have attempted to sketch a crude continuum from strategic/territorial/popular groups to utopian, cell-based, globally-focused groups. This suggests that some groups straddle the entire spectrum, while other groups might occupy a fairly specific position. ISIL for instance espouses global ambitions and subscribes to a utopian ideology, yet its operations thus far have been territorial and strategic, whereas the 'core' Al Qaida organisation based in Pakistan/Afghanistan is a cell-based organisation focusing on terrorist attacks against the West. What is not represeted here is that groups may also change their orientation over time: Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) in Syria, for instance, began as a terrorist organisation but quickly began to act as an insurgent, territorially focused group, while Al Shabaab is arguably moving in the opposite direction. The schema thus shows, albeit crudely, the variety and range of Islamist violent groups, and the extent to which some of them defy polarised categorisation.
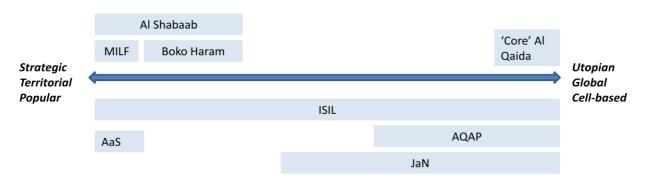
Figure 2: Schematic Continuum of Islamist Violent Extremist Groups (source: RUSI)

Religious Ideology

Ideology – a worldview or set of beliefs that guides individual or collective action – is frequently debated in terrorism studies. While some studies assume that ideology is a simple motivating factor, Della Porta (2001) is among those for whom ideology should be seen more as an enabler, reducing "the psychological costs of participation in terrorist organisations" by promoting doctrines of legitimacy and positive emotions leading to a sense of self-righteousness.

When it comes to Islamist violent extremism, how important ideology really is has become contested and politicised, with some writers going as far as asserting (controversially) that Islam, or at least Islamism, is inherently violent (e.g. Lewis, 2002; Pipes, 1989). Most scholars assume that ideology has an effect, rather than examine what it is, how it works, and why. Some political science approaches (such as Neumann, 2013; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler, 2006) offer ideology as a causal explanation for the onset of Islamist extremist violence and its persistence: how else can we explain why some groups resort to violence while others do not? Other studies suggest that ideology follows rather than precedes violent planning and action. However, Islamist terrorists are not unique in this: Crenshaw, for example, points out that all terrorists need to cope with the recognition that they kill people by employing a belief system that protects against the feelings of guilt and anxiety (1981: 395).

Much terrorism research argues, or assumes, a sharp distinction between nationalists whose violence is based on nation or ethnicity, and ideological groups: ideological terrorists seek to transform global society rather than establish a separate homeland; Islamist extremists may desire a new Caliphate but do not seem to be motivated by any particular nationalist or ethnic identity (Fettweis, 2009: 270; Piazza, 2009). Gleave (2014) argues that Islam itself does not lead to violence, but that some forms of Islamic theology have greater potential to pose a security risk than others. He singles out specifically the ideological framework created by Salafists in the 1970s and 1980s that led to the global jihadist movement. Hegghammer (2010; 2010/11) makes a similar case, but differentiates jihadists from Islamist revolutionaries and terrorists: Islamists who fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia followed a defensive, territorial programme that was predicated on the belief that Muslims were under attack or occupation and needed to be defended, and which was developed by the Palestinian academic Abdullah Azzam (1941-89), a veteran of the short-lived militant campaign that followed the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Islamist revolutionaries in for example Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s, drawing on the theories of the Islamist revolutionary thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), sought to remake society but on a national rather than global basis. However, it was only in the 1990s that Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Usama bin Ladin articulated the doctrine of the 'far enemy' – the United States as hidden hand behind Arab autocracy and the oppression of Muslims – that the 'global jihad' movement really emerged (Ranstorp, 1998; Gerges, 2009).

What 'jihad' (literally: 'struggle') actually means clearly is crucial here. Whilst in much of the literature it is simplistically and inaccurately conflated with terrorism, more culturally informed work recognises that jihad – in its primary sense of war-fighting – is a mainstream concept in Islamic jurisprudence (see for example Hegghammer, 2010/11). It is, nonetheless, a term with rich and varied meanings, and some commentators, drawing on a saying ('Hadith') attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, that war-fighting is actually the "lesser jihad", with the "greater jihad" being a personal, spiritual struggle (see for example Post, 2009).[1] Although this has achieved some popular currency, jurists consider this Hadith to be weak and therefore the concept of "greater jihad", in Islamic jurisprudence at least, lacks authenticity (Cook, 2005). What contemporary violent Islamists have achieved is extending the semantic scope of jihad beyond 'just war theory' in order to legitimise

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[1] The Hadith is recorded in Imam al-Bayhaqi, *Al-Zuhd Al-Kabir*: "A number of fighters came to the Messenger of Allah, and he said: 'You have done well in coming from the 'lesser jihad' to the 'greater jihad'. And they said: 'What is the greater jihad?' And he said: 'For the servant [of God] to fight his passions'."

terrorist violence, revolutionary violence, and insurgency, while promoting jihad as Islam's 'sixth pillar' or 'forgotten obligation', and hence an individual rather than collective duty for Muslims (Brahimi, 2010; Van de Voorde, 2011).

Some valuable studies examine not so much Islamist ideology in general, but the ideologies of particular groups or movements. Holbrook (2014) presents an authoritative account of Al Qaida's ideology as revealed by its public communications, and argues that it has in fact failed to achieve its primary objective of mobilising a worldwide revolution against the existing order, while Kepel and Milelli's (2008) edition of major works by Islamist ideologues – Abdullah Azzam, Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – elucidates the distinctive messages of each, and the differences between them: Azzam articulated a notion of defensive jihad, bin Ladin and Al-Zawahiri turned this into a doctrine of pre-emption or defence through aggression, while al-Zarqawi emphasised the importance of creating a territorial base sustained by permanent war. Maher (2015) offers the fullest account of 'Salafi-jihadism' – the term increasingly used as a self-descriptor by Islamist militants and insurgents who adopt a global jihadist programme. Importantly, he presents Salafi-jihadism as a broad and loose movement – an animating idea rather than a group with a programme. This suggests that ideology should be seen in this context not so much as a system of beliefs and theories, but a diverse and variable set of ideas and policies. Maher argues that, unlike the highly conservative and mostly apolitical Salafist movement as a whole, Salafi-jihadists believe the domestic and international political order requires transformation, and that this can only be done on the battlefield. "Salafi-jihadism is therefore necessarily millenarian and eschatological in nature" (20). Although this ideology is framed in religious terms, and appeals to religious values – a return to the purity of the first communities and political structures of seventh-century Muslims – Maher's account suggests that we should see it rather as a highly modern, utopian movement. In this he echoes Gray (2003), whose historical-philosophical exploration of Al Qaida's ideology challengingly positions global jihadism as a distinctively modern movement which draws its essential belief – that the world can be purified by acts of transformative violence – not from seventh-century Arabia but post-Enlightenment Europe.

There is however much work that casts doubt on the importance of ideology in both terrorism and conflict. Several studies question whether conflicts which are framed by participants in religious

terms are actually manifestations of some other historical force or process – which may not even be understood by participants themselves. Kaldor has been the most influential proposer of such a thesis. Her 'old and new wars' studies (1999, 2006) argue that globalisation has given rise to new kinds of conflicts which are fought by networks rather than standing armies, are financed by predatory means, aim to control populations rather than territory, and are fought for and against identity groups rather than ideologies. While Kaldor's work has been criticised as misrepresenting 'small wars' as 'new wars', and assuming that her main case (the 1992-95 Bosnian War) is representative, her conclusions are nonetheless recognisable in some current conflicts, including (arguably) in Iraq and Syria, as she suggests that new wars are most likely to arise as centralized, authoritarian states lose legitimacy or begin to collapse. Kaldor suggests that religion matters as an identity-label rather than for any theological or ideological content. As a result, conflicts "may take the guise of traditional nationalism, tribalism or religious fundamentalism", but are actually the result of the disintegration of states and structures under the pressures of globalisation. Neumann (2009) essentially reprises Kaldor's argument and applies it more narrowly to terrorist groups.

Other studies question the salience of religion and religiously framed ideology by examining the social formation of conflict and violence. Atran (2011), for instance, concludes that "people don' t simply die and kill for a cause. They die and kill for each other" (ix). Gupta (2005) reaches a similar conclusion. This is evident not only in the group psychology of armies and terrorist groups – on which point he receives strong endorsement from his erstwhile collaborator Sageman (2004, 2007), whose "bunch of guys" theory uses case histories to show that most terrorists join violent groups through social relationships – but also in terms of the "imagined communities" (Anderson 1982) of large identity groups such as nations or the *umma* (the global community of Muslims). Humans are capable of extraordinary feats, creative and destructive, if motivated by feelings of kinship, real or imagined. Atran thus proposes that terrorist violence is, whatever politicians may say, neither nihilistic nor motivated by hatred, but altruistic: terrorists are "extreme moralists" (xi). Taking a sociological perspective, Vertigans (2008) agrees.

Psychologists also question the extent to which ideology is evident at an individual level in the terrorist dataset. Horgan and Taylor (2001) insist that "there is rarely a conscious decision made to become a terrorist", while Horgan's interviews with former terrorists (2009) found little evidence

that they joined because of an idea, while in almost every case they disengaged without abandoning their radical views. For psychologists like Horgan and Borum (2004), there is a fundamental problem with the thesis that ideas lead to violence: the psychological evidence shows that the relationship between ideas and action is, in fact, weak. Ideology may, then, be more a justification or form of legitimation for violence than a motivation.

Islamism and Politics

One important point often overlooked in Western-centric studies is the extent to which, in the MENA region as in South Asia, Islamism is usually expressed politically rather than violently. Hamid's authoritative 2014 study of political Islamism emphasises the popularity of parties and movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood: its Palestinian manifestation, Hamas, won the Legislative Council elections in 2006 and still heads the government of Gaza, while the former ruling party in Yemen, Al Islah, originated from a Saudi-backed militia affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. A different strain of Islamism, one based in Salafist activism, produced the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which won local elections across Algeria in 1990 and was heading for victory in national elections in 1992 when the Algerian military suspended the process, precipitating civil war. As these examples show, Islamists are not fundamentally opposed to political participation or even to democracy: in response to governmental repression across the region, Islamist parties began "to accept many of the foundational tenets of democracy, including popular sovereignty and the alternation of power. Across the region they adopted increasingly moderate positions on political pluralism and women's and minority rights. Moreover, they moved to democratize their organizational structures. Jordan's Islamic Action Front, for example, achieved a level of internal democracy that remains unparalleled in the region". The history of Islamist parties in the region thus belies the intuitive assumption that repression leads to political extremism: "Islamists moderated not only in the absence of democracy but as repression was getting worse" (Hamid 2014, 38). Other studies endorse this finding, such as Lia and Skolberg (2004).

One explanation for this counter-intuitive observation is that the MENA region's Islamist parties are not like traditional political parties in Western Europe. They are also often deeply-rooted civil society organisations, providing basic services and operating "a network of parallel institutions" to those of the state: "A movement that essentially operates as a mini-state [...] is particularly sensitive to

repression" (Hamid 2014, 49-50). This last point is an important reminder that Islamist parties are often also social movements that are deeply embedded in MENA states: while low and medium levels of repression serve as moderating influences, attempts to eradicate Islamist parties, as occurred in Syria in the early 1980s, in Algeria from 1992, and which is now underway in Egypt, can provoke a violent backlash which may even lead to civil war. Another recent study (Piazza, 2015) disaggregates repression into nine different types and shows that some forms of repression – blocking non-violent participation and oppressing ethnic or religious minorities – are strongly correlated with an increased risk of terrorism.

Ideology and Narrative

The importance of narrative to Islamist extremism is often emphasised. The term 'single narrative' as a description for the Al-Qaida worldview entered into official British government language after 9/11. It seeks to capture the totalizing and reductive nature of Al-Qaida's propaganda, which presents a long history of conflicts involving Muslims across the world as being evidence of the West's war against Islam; where others previously saw conflict and repression as local and specific, Al-Qaida's 'single narrative' says that they are merely manifestations of the West's implacable fear and hatred.

Is there anything unique to Islamist extremism of promoting a reductive but powerfully simple narrative frame in which the whole of human history can be contained? Kepel (2008) does not go this far, but emphasises how Al-Qaida's worldview is not merely a conspiracy theory but is rooted in the history of Islam: Al-Qaida (and, we might now add, ISIL) present the current situation as a continuation of a 1,400-year struggle between Islam and its enemies (6). Funck and Said (2004) claim Islamic extremists elicit narratives of a "clash of civilisations" which makes the perception of conflict different from other types of conflict. Halverson, Goodall and Corman (2011) focus not on the 'single narrative' but on twelve "master-narratives" that recur in Islamist communications (including Shi'a ones). They suggest that the Qor'an's unique literary structure – rather than repeat linear, quasi-historical stories, it "references or recounts elements (or fragments) of narratives [...] to support and illustrate different messages for the reader" – may make it particularly productive for those seeking legitimizing or mobilizing narratives.

Comparative approaches to narrative and ideology tend to find similarities across the whole field of violent extremisms. Saucier et al. (2009) examined propaganda from thirteen violent groups from across the political and religious spectrums and found sixteen themes which concerned history, peril, enmity, and the necessity of a violent response, all of which were common to at least four groups. Moreover, the themes could be slotted together like jigsaw pieces "to construct a potentially compelling narrative, which may be a key part of the ideological appeal of [...] militant-extremist groups". To illustrate, Saucier et al. constructed an 'ur-narrative' of extremism which fits all thirteen groups in the study and which may be seen as a universal prototype for extremist narrative:

> Our enemies are more like animals than like humans. We have a duty to attack and kill the enemies of our people. If you are protecting what is sacred and holy, anything you do is moral and justifiable. Government is illegitimate unless based strictly on God's authority as found in the holy book. Foreigners have stolen land from our people and they are now trying to steal more. If necessary, we should use force to cleanse the world of corruption. Going to war can sometimes be sacred and righteous. We should become warriors in the army of righteousness. The best way to die is defending your beliefs. Extreme measures are needed now to restore virtue and righteousness in this world. (Saucier et al. 2009, 267)

More troublingly, this research also suggests that the extremist worldview may not be as 'extreme' as is often assumed: tested against random samples of students in two countries, "respondents generally failed to strongly disassociate themselves from the sentiments" in the narrative (267).

A major theme in Islamist violent extremism is martyrdom. Pape (2005) is among several who argues that narratives of martyrdom is essential to justify suicide missions to the would-be assailants: "The more the status of terrorist martyrs is elevated, and the more plausible it becomes that others will follow in their footsteps" (347). In a conflict, martyrdom has a powerful propagandising and motivational function: it enables individual defeats to be presented as cosmic victories. Again, however, it is important to note that a culture of martyrdom is by no means confined to Islamism: secular, even atheist groups may equally promote self-sacrifice in conflict situations (Woolffe and Moorhead, 2015).

Radicalisation

Although now widely accepted in government and public discourse, radicalisation in the sense of individuals being drawn into terrorism is actually a recent term. Sedgwick (2010) shows that it was

rare in the English-language media before 9/11, but achieved 'lift-off' after the July 2005 attacks in London; he also shows that it is applied almost exclusively to Islamist extremism. Is radicalisation therefore new, or merely a new way of looking at violent or potentially violent individuals or movements? Awan, Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2012) argue for the latter, seeing radicalisation as a construct of western governments and mass media, while Horgan (2014) avoids what he sees as the product of political rather than scientific thinking. Similarly, Githens-Mazer (2011) regards the term as unusable in academic discourse, and highlights the absence of an accepted definition. By contrast, Neumann (2013) takes to task those who dispute the existence of processes of behavioural or cognitive change leading to violent action: he is clear that ideas can and do lead to violence, so cognitive changes are required for individuals to embrace terrorism. But critics such as Sedgwick and Horgan point to the dangers of the concept as well as the term: it emphasises the individual and, to some extent, the ideology while underplaying the wider circumstances – root causes, grievances, and (most importantly for Horgan) the social factors. As a result, Horgan maintains that terrorism should be seen primarily as a behaviour rather than a belief, while Sedgwick observes that "rather than addressing the wider circumstances there is a tendency to conflate groups and individuals operating in disparate circumstances on the basis of what they have in common: Islam and violence".

This point about conflation is important. The radicalisation debate focuses on the processes by which individuals in western societies become drawn into terrorism (for a more detailed examination of drivers of radicalisation, see our separate DFID paper, 'Drivers of Radicalisation'). In doing so, there is an implicit assumption that what works for the terrorist dataset in western Europe presumably works in, for example, the MENA region. Aside from Sageman's 2004 study, which is empirically grounded but dependent on secondary sources, and which focuses on international terrorists who have come to attention in the West, we found a distinct lack of empirical studies looking at recruitment and radicalisation in the Middle East, Africa and Asia with the exception of studies of militants in Lebanon, Palestine and Indonesia (e.g. Kivimaki 2007). Studies of conflicts in which violent Islamists have participated suggest there are many ways individuals can be drawn in. Kilcullen (2009), for instance, argues that conflicts can turn citizens into 'accidental guerrillas' as circumstances force them to take up arms.

A somewhat neglected aspect in discussions of radicalisation is the traumatic effect of conflict on refugees. There is however speculation that refugees and conflict-generated diaspora can become socialised to accept the use of violence to achieve political objectives. In their study of the Somali diaspora in Denmark, Taarnby and Hallundbaek (2010) stress that many Somalis seem to struggle with untreated traumas from the war, and describe this collective Somali state of mind as a "bomb waiting to go off". At the same time, the group identity of conflict-generated diasporas may be tied to collective trauma – and grave violations can trigger fear, anger and threat to that collective identity. Koinova (2011) found that an episode of Israeli bombing of Gaza, for example, provoked a large-scale mobilisation of the Palestinian diaspora so that the Palestinian Authority lost support in diaspora circles at the expense of Hamas, its radical Islamic competitor. If diaspora groups have yet to mobilise, however, it is less likely that such violations will lead to radicalisation (Koinova, 2011). It should, however, be noted that this is not unique to Muslim diaspora communities. Bell (2009), for instance, finds that the LTTE in Sri Lanka was sustained by financial support from Tamil diaspora channelled through the radical World Tamil Movement.

Identity

Identity has long been seen as a major factor in why individuals become involved in violent movements. Studies on radicalisation find that the individual's search for identity is an important stage in radicalisation processes (Al Raffie, 2013; Vidino, 2011). There is substantial evidence for religion and ethnicity being among the most powerful expressions of individual and group identity. Psychologists such as Borum and Horgan emphasise the importance of social identity in explaining why people join militant groups or become involved in action: they do so because they see themselves as belonging to the community that the violent group claims to represent. Atran (2011) insists that people kill and allow themselves to be killed not for a cause but for each other – his notion of 'kin' encompasses everything from blood-relatives to ethnic groups and the 'imagined communities' of globalised identity groups such as the Muslim *umma*.

Several scholars (e.g. Hegghammer 2010/11, Gleave 2014, Maher 2015) examine this 'imagined community' in the context of Islamist violent extremism, and agree that what emerged from the 1990s was an idea of transnational Muslim identity which claimed to supersede specific ethnic, cultural or geographical notions of identity. Initially, in the 1980s and 1990s, this transnational

identity was mobilised for defensive purposes, but it subsequently became developed by Al Qaida and others into a doctrine of global terrorism and revolution.

This may particularly be the case for second and third generation immigrants/refugees who have fewer ties to their country of origin than their parents or grandparents. Cultural marginalisation among second and third generation immigrant and diaspora communities can lead to an identity crisis, which can render them vulnerable to radicalisation. Some authors argue that multiculturalism in Europe has often resulted in the development of separate, parallel societies (Schmid, 2014; Parent and Ellis, 2011; Zimmermann and Rosenau, 2009). Sirseloudi (2012) argues that the separation of religion from its culture of origin has led some Muslim diaspora communities to identify with the *umma* and hence to be motivated by solidarity with Muslim victims in overseas wars. Al Raffie (2013) argues that discrimination (whether real or perceived) can be a source of frustration that contributes to identity crises. Abbas and Siddique (2012) find that British Muslim respondents felt they did not fully belong to Britain because of their South Asian origin and commitments to Islam, which they believed was talked about in explicitly xenophobic terms.

Construction of identity is not simple, however. Juergensmeyer (2003) states that while "religion is a useful label in everyday life" it is too "vague to meaningfully separate from other equally significant identity markers such as ethno/nationalist identity." As with ethnicity, religious identity can be activated by ideologues or elites to further their interests. Likewise, as with religious leaders, politically-motivated ethnic elites are able to capitalise on shared identity by promoting transnational ethnic networks to support co-ethnic insurgents in the homeland. Several studies acknowledge the role of elites in engendering insecurity through highly selective and often distorted narratives and representations (e.g. Kaldor, 2007; Yadav, 2010). This is a widely-used technique, and by no means confined to Islamist extremists. However, where Muslim identity is invoked for political purposes, as for example by Al Islah during the Yemeni civil war, or by the FIS in Algeria, its effects may persist and become harnessed later by violent extremists.

Similarly, in examining the rise of the Taliban, Schmeidl (2002) shows that protracted conflict situations can produce a generation of children who have grown up in refugee camps, never knowing their homeland, or peace. She recommends greater attention in protracted conflicts to trauma and argues for meeting emotional and psychological needs and providing education services alongside

food and shelter. Similarly, protracted situations also result in reduced expectations for the future, increasing feelings of hopelessness, and desperation among refugees/internally displaced people (IDPs). These sentiments may make them more easily recruited by violent groups (Lischer, 2006). Further, host societies are likely to become less hospitable the longer a refugee/IDP crisis lasts, as the economic and social drain of hosting refugees/IDPs becomes more pronounced. Resentment on the part of host societies, alongside restrictions placed on refugee/IDP activities, can exacerbate a sense of desperation among refugees and IDPs. This, in turn, could make them more susceptible to political manipulation by extremists. Lischer (2008) finds that militant groups in Iraq have capitalised on this opportunity, offering shelter and protection to exiles and increasing recruitment activities in IDP settlements.

Absolutism/Openness to Negotiation

Religious terrorists, and Islamist extremists in particular, are often assumed not to be amenable to political processes or negotiation. Even though there is evidence that some Islamist groups are willing to participate in negotiations and peace processes – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, and potentially the Taliban in Afghanistan being notable, current example – groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIL appear to uninterested in resolving disputes or grievances using anything other than violence. There may therefore be a distinction to be drawn between groups which are nationalist or separatist and also Islamist, and groups which are Islamist and 'universalist' (Piazza, 2009). The former may negotiate, the latter may not.

Juergensmeyer's anthropological study (2003) of religiously-motivated violence identifies a belief common to a wide range of movements (and certainly not confined to Islamists): "What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle — cosmic war — in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation" (148).

A major concept here is sacredness. Several important studies address this in various ways. Atran (2011, 37-38) notes that sociologists and anthropologists have identified sacred values as ways to "authenticate society as having existence beyond the mere aggregation of its individuals and

institutions". Despite thus having a positive or even essential effect, they nonetheless inhibit rational negotiation: "they cannot be fully expressed and analysed because they include inscrutable propositions that are immune to logic or empirical evidence". Stern (2003) is interested in the sacralization of resources, especially territory: resource competition becomes uncompromising when one or more parties in the conflict attribute sacred values to the resource, as in Israel/Palestine (30-31). (She does not, though, consider whether sacralisation is a cause or effect of resource competition: it may be both.)

Sacred values are not, however, exclusively religious. Knott (2013) argues that secular ideologies or movements may be equally given to holding non-negotiable values which are seen as above or beyond examination and debate. In other words, the common assumption that religious groups – including militant ones – are usually uncompromising whereas secular groups will always ultimately be prepared to negotiate may be unfounded. Francis (2015) argues from this that 'sacredness' is a more useful concept than religion for understanding terrorist motivations and legitimation: all violent groups, whether 'secular' or 'religious', fight for values or rewards that are, at least initially, seen as non-negotiable.

Taking this further, the Salafi-jihadist movement may lack incentives to negotiate not because of theological beliefs but because of the scope of its political ambition. Holbrook (2014) has shown just how ambitious Al Qaida has been in its aspiration to trigger a kind of global revolt, while Maher (2015) positions the movement more widely as utopian: nothing less than a new world order will do. Fettweis (2009) argues that "ideological fervour generally proves much more difficult to pass onto future generations than nationalist pride" which accounts, he claims, for nationalist terrorists achieving greater longevity. Such a claim does not seem to stand up to scrutiny, however, where so much work points to the longevity of global jihadism from its origins in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s (Hegghammer 2010).

Some scholars dissent from the view that Islamist extremists or religious terrorism in general is less amenable to negotiation. Kaplan (1978) argues that all terrorists have a pathological need to pursue absolute ends and join with others in doing so: drawing on psychoanalysis, he sees this as the effect of threats to individuals' self-esteem. Rangelov and Kaldor (2012) emphasise the challenge of

resolving contemporary conflicts in general, which tend to be seen as protracted due to the engagement of global and local actors and the international connectedness of conflicts. This is not therefore a unique problem to conflicts involving Islamist violent extremists.

Aims and Motivations

Proponents of the 'new terrorism' theory argue that religion – which usually means Islam – defines the aims of most violent extremist groups in the last 35 years. Rapoport (2004) and Neumann (2009) accept the stated religious aims of groups such as Al Qaida at face value, but do not spend much time investigating what those aims are and how religious they might be in reality, although Rapoport identifies the establishment of theocratic rather than secular states as the main aims of extreme Sunni, Shia, Sikh and Zionist groups.

A major area of contention in the literature is the extent to which grievances – individual and group, personal and vicarious – can be understood as 'drivers' or 'root causes' of violent extremism. While the literature supports the view that there is a strong relationship between perceived grievances and violent extremism the argument among researchers is over the nature of the relationship: are they causative, or merely used to justify and legitimise? In general, work in terrorism studies is more sceptical, while in conflict studies is more accepting. For example, Gupta (2005) finds that grievances are necessary but not sufficient to cause terrorism — grievances need to be instrumentalised by charismatic individuals or "political entrepreneurs", and social and psychological factors need to align as well. Meanwhile, Gurr's influential Relative Deprivation Theory predicts that when there is frustration about the relative position of individuals in terms of what they have and their perceptions of what they ought to have, the likelihood of violence increases. USAID's position is that discrimination, political marginalisation, a sense of "anger at the perceived victimisation of fellow Muslims around the globe", repression of human rights, and foreign occupation are important drivers of Islamist violence. Koinova (2011) argues that the perpetration of grave violations of human rights in the homeland are likely to have a strong radicalising impact on diaspora politics. Whine (2009) states that political and foreign events (e.g. events in Kashmir and Palestine, the Iraq War, genocide of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina) have been a driving force in activating Muslim political engagement and recruitment by Islamist groups.

Research in conflict studies increasingly points to failures of governance as a primary driver of violence. Ganiel (2012), for example, argues that "[r]eligion is often a response to the failure of the state to deal with human security", pointing to the example of Boko Haram which emerged after the Nigerian state spectacularly failed to provide for the security of the Nigerian population. Dowd and Lind (2015) argue that while the expanding reach of violence by militant Islamic organisations in sub-Saharan Africa is often viewed through the prism international concerns about terrorism, the history of each country suggests that contemporary violence is often a legacy of earlier conflicts: "Local grievances, mapped onto highly politicised regional and religious identities, can account for the simultaneous rise of violence in such diverse contexts." In this analysis, historical grievances, a state's failure over time to address deeply-rooted marginalisation and insecurity, and its use of repressive machinery to respond to insurgencies cause violence to recur.

At the same time, the economic, social and political marginalisation of ethnic or religious groups is believed to increase the risk of violent extremism. The perceived exclusion of Sunni Arabs from the post-2003 political settlement in Iraq, for example, is widely cited as a cause of the 2006-07 civil war and the later rise of ISIL (Tripp, 2007; Weiss and Hassan, 2015). However, Silke (2008) suggests that perceived discrimination against the Catholic population of Northern Ireland prompted a turn to violence but notes that sectarian discrimination does not necessarily lead to violent extremism.

Howard (2014) finds a strong correlation between state failure and political violence, while others point to the correlation between poverty and civil violence (Tschirgi et al., 2010; Duffield 2001). Flanagan (2008) and Grynkewich (2008) find that Islamist and non-Islamist groups alike are strengthened by state failures to provide basic services. Quantitative studies show that state instability is "the most consistent predictor of country-level terrorist attacks" (Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey et al., 2013; see also Piazza, 2007). In the terrorism literature, however, there is no consensus on the relationship between governance and poverty on the one hand and violence on the other, with most studies tending to doubt the existence of a causal relationship. Piazza (2006, 2009), for example, finds no correlation between economic development and political violence, while individual-level studies of terrorists find perpetrators show a wide mix of socio-economic backgrounds (see for example Sageman 2004). Vertigans (2008), however, finds evidence for relative deprivation in his comparative sociological study of militant groups.

Studies which extend their cases or samples beyond Islamist extremism often conclude that factors behind violent extremism are generally consistent, suggesting that, in terms of causes, Islamist extremism is not especially different from other religiously motivated or structured extremism. Stern (2003) for instance sees economic and governance crises as fundamental causes of violence and conflict in general; Muslim-majority countries tend to be particularly vulnerable because their states often are either failing (or have failed), are corruptly and/or repressively governed, and are afflicted by falling living standards.

Motivation and Gender

More recently, the literature has started to explore the motivations of women violent extremists. The literature advances two theories: that women are manipulated by men into becoming terrorists, and that terrorism is the result of patriarchal hegemony (Jacques and Taylor, 2009). For example, Palestinian female suicide bombers have been seen as a tool of male Palestinian society and an aspect of female oppression (Berko and Erez, 2008) and Chechnyan 'black widows' are often discussed in terms of seeking revenge for the deaths of their husbands at the hands of Russian troops (Nacos, 2005). Research on female suicide terrorism tends to associate it with more personal and revenge motivations, such as a response to rape (Bloom, 2011), and adduces fewer religious/nationalistic motivations (González, Freilich, and Chermak, 2014), potentially overlooking other factors such as political grievances (Nacos, 2005). However, studies based on interviews with female terrorists have shown women to be active agents who can play important roles in extremist groups (Jacques and Taylor, 2013). These authors convincingly argue that women tend to join violent extremist groups for much the same, complex reasons as men (O'Rourke, 2009). There is also growing recognition that women's complex roles may involve supporting or encouraging violent extremism: both Islamist and other extremist movements attract many female supporters, whose roles, although mainly non-violent, can be influential (Mahan and Griset, 2013; Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014). There is some case study evidence to show that in certain contexts, wives and mothers play an influential role in encouraging men towards radical interpretations of Islam (Sageman, 2004; Zahab, 2008). Despite this, terrorism and counter-terrorism narratives tend to reinforce gender stereotypes. These stereotypes can be heavily racialised and include, for example, ideas about Muslim women as passive, subordinate, moderate, and maternal (Detraz, 2012; Center

for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011). Focusing on gender clichés overlooks the agency of women in such situations and the legitimate grievances that may drive their involvement.

Women's potential for violence is assumed to be limited when extremist movements adhere to highly masculinised ideologies, in which women are ascribed purely 'supportive' roles. Islamist ideology is strictly gendered and the majority of Islamist scholars forbid women's participation in violent jihad (Lahoud, 2014). This is held to explain why the majority of incidents of violent extremism still overwhelmingly involve men (Bakker, 2007; Gartenstein Ross, 2009, Sageman, Groen, and Kranenberg, 2011). However, other research (e.g. Ness, 2007) notes an increasing tendency for women and girls to become involved in Islamist violent extremism, despite its assumed patriarchal nature. In the West a small number of convert women have travelled abroad to commit or become involved in violent Islamist attacks and have also joined Kurdish forces to oppose Islamic State (Gowrinathan, 2014). It is estimated that 18% of foreigners going to Syria currently are women (TRAC, 2014). Dearing (2010) notes that the global Salafi-jihadist movement has influenced many of the most recent female suicide missions by groups in Iraq, Somalia, and Chechnya. Operational imperatives often make female members highly effective actors for their organisations, inducing leaders toward 'actor innovation' to gain strategic advantage over their adversaries (Davis, 2006; Cunningham, 2007; Bloom, 2011).

Rationality

Terrorism has long been seen by scholars as fundamentally rational and often instrumental, despite appearances to the contrary. Ruby (2002) is among those who see terrorism as asymmetric warfare, a "form of military action carried out by rational and well-functioning people who do not have access to conventional means and who have valid political motivation for resorting to violence"; terrorists are thus those who "lack the necessary resources to wage war in furtherance of their political goals". Cooper (1976) and Jenkins (1983) also assert that terrorists use violence instrumentally in the absence of other means of projecting power: "Terrorists and soldiers differ not in terms of whether mentally pathological but in terms of whether they have access to conventional military means" (Cooper 1976). The emergence of Al Qaida, however, has put this thesis under some strain. Some writers argue that religion is by its nature irrational, and therefore religiously motivated violence (if that is what Islamist extremism is) must be also. Smilansky (2004) puts in especially stark terms what

scholars in a number of disciplines assert (but often fail to examine): "Fanatical religious and nationalist pride and intolerance, the psychological attractions of being a 'victim' rather than assuming responsibility for one's difficulties, an uncritical culture of resentment and envy, romantic idealisations of struggle and violence, open hatred for otherness, irrational myths, the self-destructive desire for mastery, and other such beliefs and passions seem to lie behind contemporary terrorism."

Stern's rather impressionistic 2003 work examines grievances ("alienation, humiliation, demographic shifts, historical wrongs, and claims over territory") and goals along three dimensions ("spiritual to temporal", "instrumental to expressive", "ideological to profit-driven"). While there is much to argue with in Stern's methods and analysis, her book has the virtue of presenting religiously motivated or religiously structured terrorism as diverse, using a range of case-studies from Zionist extremists to American anti-abortionists. She concludes that emotions and irrational beliefs in supporters or potential supporters are often instrumentalized by leaders or ideologues to achieve their ends through violence – "creating killers out of lost souls" (30-31). These ends may be faith-based and immaterial (and hence, in her terms, irrational), or pragmatic and material: in several case studies (Palestine, Kashmir, Maluku in Indonesia) her book comes back to the importance of territory as the ultimate objective of the violent group, with religion and religious ideology being often the means to a rationally-desired end. But her book also argues that religiously inspired violent groups consistently begin with utopian aspirations, even if that is not often where they end: "From their perspective, they are purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is anti-human". Although such utopianism is not in itself irrational, it may be motivated or accompanied by a "spiritual calling", and many terrorists "report a kind of spiritual high or addiction related to its fulfilment" (Stern, 2003: 281).

A number of studies dispute the assumption that religious motivation necessarily entails irrationality, positing instead rationalist models of extreme religiously-framed violence deriving from economics. Rather than seeing Islamists as grievance-stricken reactionaries, recent research has reconceptualised Islamist extremists as strategic thinkers engaged in cost-benefit calculations. For example, Lia (2008) examines in depth the thinking of the global jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri and reveals him as a strategist versed in the theory of insurgency and 'leaderless resistance'. Even

movements seen in terms of ideological zeal can be seen as more strategic. Doran (2002) for example sees Al Qaeda not only as rational but also pragmatic: "it manoeuvres around its dogmas with alacrity", and while its long-term goals are "set by fervent devotion to radical religious ideology in its short-term behaviour it is a rational political actor operating according to dictates of realpolitik" (178). Pape (2006) describes suicide terrorism as "an extreme form of the 'rationality of irrationality'" (see below for further discussion of suicide terrorism). Meanwhile, others point to the success of suicide attacks in achieving group goals. For example, Kippenberg (2005) shows that the US and France left Lebanon after suicide attacks against their barracks in October 1983, while some years later Israel followed. This contributed to high esteem for suicide attacks in Middle East.

Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler (2006) aim to "initiate a broader understanding of rational action in the study of radical Islam by emphasising the role of beliefs and relationships among ideology, individual utility calculations, and behaviour." They argue that "[r]adical Islamic movements offer an important spiritual incentive: join the group and engage in risky and costly activism and receive eternal salvation […] Where individuals believe that the spiritual payoffs outweigh the negative consequences of strategies in the here and now, high-cost/risk activism is intelligible as a rational choice" if we take the content of the movement's ideology seriously (295-6). They recognise that not everyone who participates in radical Islamic groups is driven by spiritual desire, and acknowledge the important differences between the utility calculation of leaders and those of followers and affiliates.

Berman (2009) examines the greater lethality of Islamist groups (see also below) using an economic theory called the 'club model'. The concept of rationality is central to economics, much of which rests on the assumption that individuals seek to maximise pleasure or profit and minimise pain or loss. The 'club model' examines how a community operates economically, and Berman uses sociology as well as economics to argue that radical religious communities are sustained by theology and by mutuality and sacrifice. Requiring members to "demonstrate their commitment to the group through some costs or painful sacrifice" weeds out 'free-riders' (15-16) and increases community cohesion, so if and when such communities turn to violence they have a huge advantage over secular groups in terms of members' commitment. Berman's analysis implies that sacrifice (whether of one's time or of one's life) in faith-based communities is not irrational when judged by the needs of the community rather than the individual. Atran, drawing on evolutionary biology and anthropology, draws a similar

conclusion: humans have adapted to survive in groups, and in common with other primates we tend to be willing to make individual sacrifices to ensure the group's survival. Atran's wide-ranging discussion nevertheless identifies religious faith, and hence militancy which claims to be religiously motivated, as irrational – in an objective rather than pejorative sense. It is irrational in encouraging behaviour which is not cost-effective and in its dependence on supernatural beliefs. Atran posits religion as fundamental to human evolution as it derives from our basic need to cooperate to compete: religious communities, whether real or imagined, enable humans to bond together in order to win resources from other communities. Although Atran's discussion might seem far removed from the topic, it is actually highly relevant in that he argues that religion, religiously inspired terrorism, and conflict are all fundamental to our humanity and are co-dependent.

Geography and Territory

In emphasising how violent groups sacralise contested resources, Stern (2003) argues that the "religious passions" leaders can encourage in their followers become "a weapon in a war that is often actually about control of natural resources or political power". Where those resources are territorial, the conflict attracts supporters from further afield, which can intensify and prolonging it: "Once contestants claim to be fighting a 'holy war', religious militants on both sides flock to the region. [...] Religious language expands the pool of potential sympathizers, recruits, and funders beyond the contested region to wherever coreligionists are found." Religiously framed conflicts may also spread as foreign fighters, and the humanitarian/militant support infrastructures to support them, look for new causes if the original conflict winds down or changes direction. There is support for this latter point from Malet's work on foreign fighters in history (2013) specifically in the context of recent Islamist participation in conflicts. Malet argues that repression in the MENA region prevented the 'Afghan Arabs' who fought against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (and in the subsequent civil war) from returning home: they therefore became the first group of foreign fighters in history not to demobilize. Their subsequent participation in civil wars in Algeria, Bosnia and Chechnya started a pattern of transnational participation that continues to this day.

One particularly relevant instance is the effect of Islamist foreign fighters on the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq. The leader of what became Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), and which ultimately mutated into ISIL, was Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, better known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a

Jordanian who had operated his own militant training camp in Afghanistan before 9/11. As the Coalition offensive began to sweep the non-indigenous militants out of Afghanistan, many sought sanctuary in countries such as Iran and Pakistan, but after the 2003 invasion al-Zarqawi found refuge in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi and his group of mostly non-Iraqi militants sought to change the environment to suit them (Hafez 2014). As well as recruiting additional foreign fighters – most in AQI at this time are believed to have been Saudis, Algerians, Syrians, Yemenis, Sudanese and Egyptian (Hafez 2014, 443) – al-Zarqawi's strategy was to attack Shia populations and monuments to promote sectarian warfare, and to use suicide bombing strategically, not just tactically, in order to move the conflict from classic insurgency to 'global jihad'. Al-Zarqawi himself made clear that territorial security for the mujahideen was his ultimate objective: instead of the usual pattern of fighters being forced out of the territories they had fought for (as in Afghanistan or Bosnia), a sectarian jihad would create the conditions of security for the mujahideen and insecurity for everyone else.

Homogeneity/Stability

Aggregating diverse movements, groups and activities under the single heading of terrorism is, according to Neumann (2013), the "cardinal sin" of terrorism studies. However, even contributions such as Neumann's own which recognise the diversity of what we categorise as terrorism or violent extremism are apt to conflate its Islamist manifestations into a single phenomenon. Berman (2009) is a case in point, conflating Hamas, Hizbollah and Al Qaida as Islamist terrorism without acknowledging that one is Shia and the others are Sunni, that two function as political parties (and have won elections) and as popular social movements, one is backed by Iran, two have been backed by Syria, one is a nationalist group focused solely on Israel/Palestine while the others have global ambitions or global reach.

There is little research that specifically addresses the question of the range and diversity of Islamist violent extremist groups. However, there are studies of specific groups, such as Hansen (2013) on Al Shabaab and Comolli (2015) on Boko Haram, and many on Al Qaida (Wright, 2006 and Burke, 2007 are journalistic accounts but among the most solid). These provide fine-grained accounts of how each group developed in its own specific historical and socio-political milieu, and taken together provide a corrective to simplistic, totalising explanations which present Islamist violent extremism as monolithic or homogenous. Some scholars who focus on specific groups make particular reference to

the risks of aggregation. In his examination of Al Qaida's public communications, for example, Holbrook (2014) cautions against over-simplifying the wide range and developing nature of ideological and theoretical perspectives amongst 'jihadist' movements (29-39). He suggests that the term 'single narrative' is itself reductive, simplistically combining a diverse and dynamic set of phenomena into a single analytical construct. Gerges (2005) focuses on Islamist groups in Egypt and argues that conflating Al-Qaida and its various rival groups has led to disastrous errors in counter-terrorism: by failing to appreciate that radical Islamism is a highly contested arena, and overlooking the decision to renounce violence on the part of influential ideologues in Egypt, western governments missed opportunities to delegitimise Al Qaida in the eyes of its global support base. While current analytical work such as Zelin's 2015 assessment of the current rivalry between Al-Qaida and ISIL in winning and maintaining support from affiliates in the Middle East and Africa highlights Al-Qaida's apparently declining influence, older studies of groups in Al Qaida's orbit have tended to focus on (and possibly overstate) the threat that those groups pose to the West. In general, we found a lack of appreciation of what seems to us to be a key point: Al Qaida's project since bin Ladin and Al-Zawahiri announced the International Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders in 1998 has been to unify Islamist militant groups under its banner, and in that it has clearly failed. With the exception of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaida's affiliates have stubbornly stuck or reverted to their local or regional agendas. Al Shabaab, for example, has never tried to develop a capability beyond East Africa, while AQI famously rejected Al-Zawahiri's advice to desist from its efforts to foment sectarian war in Iraq, and ISIL went further and publicly renounced its affiliation to Al Qaida when Al-Zawahiri ruled against it on an issue of allegiance.

The dynamic nature of Islamist extremism is perhaps more readily appreciated, as fluctuations in threat and mutations of extremist groups have been too obvious not to notice. Nonetheless, some writers have perceived a simple linear relationship in the evolution of extremist groups, from resistance to occupation in Afghanistan, to the birth of Al Qaida, to the development of Al Qaida's affiliates, and the mutation of AQI into ISIL. Such accounts leave much out and obscure the important point that at each stage there has been contestation between diverse and divergent movements within radical Islamism: there is nothing inevitable about the dominance of Al Qaida or the emergence of ISIL. As we have discussed, some work identifies conflict as a significant factor – perhaps *the* significant factor – in the dynamic evolution of Islamist violent extremism. Conflict also

has a dynamic of its own, which can influence group behaviour or scope – for example encouraging or forcing them to extend their reach beyond their original theatre of battle. (The movement of the so-called 'Afghan Arabs' from one theatre to another in the 1990s is a case in point.) Groups may resort to criminal activity due to the opportunities that conflict-affected environments offer. Cronin (2006) states that the "transition to criminal behaviour implies a shift away from a primary emphasis on collecting resources as a means of pursuing political ends toward acquiring material goods and profit that become ends in themselves". Islamist groups that have mutated in this way include the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Afghan Taliban. This is not, however, unique to Islamist extremist groups (cf. the Provisional IRA, ETA, and narco-terrorist groups in Colombia).

Novelty: Fundamentals

Religiously framed violence in the late 1990s triggered a wealth of book and articles viewing Al Qaida and related groups as symptomatic of a new kind of terrorism, even before 9/11. Much of this built on the work of Rapoport (1984, 2004) whose 'wave theory' of terrorism has been hugely influential. Religiously inspired terrorism is the most recent of four waves (following anarchist, anti-colonial and leftist waves), each lasting around a generation; Rapoport identifies 1979 (the year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution) as the turning-point. Neumann builds on Rapoport's assumptions and adds Kaldor's equally influential 'new war theory' to present 'new terrorism' as a response to the stresses and strains of globalisation. New terrorism is networked, religiously inspired, and aims for mass-casualty attacks. Hoffman (1999), Lesser (1999), Roy (2004), and Benjamin and Simon (2002) also argue similar cases.

Such sweeping theories quickly run into difficulties, however. Closer inspection of Rapoport and Neumann's selected case studies show them selecting on the dependent variable (see caveats above) – Neumann selects the Provisional IRA to represent 'old terrorism' and Al-Qaida to represent the new variety – and a broader sweep of data would yield many counter-examples. Both also over-emphasize aspects of their cases which support their thesis and disregard those that do not, as when Rapoport presents Sikh extremists as religious terrorists (ignoring their nationalist-separatist aims), or Neumann overstates PIRA's hierarchical structure and understates the bureaucracy and centralized

structure of 'core' Al Qaida. Mass-casualty attacks did not start in 2001 and Neumann demonstrates a lack of historical knowledge in claiming that anarchist terrorists sought to minimise civilian casualties.

Whether one agrees with Neumann and Rapoport, both studies assume that the phenomenon of 'new terrorism' is not confined to Islamist extremism, unlike much populist writing on the subject – see for example Gove (2007) and Amis (2009). Hoffman (1999), Stern (2003) and Juergensmeyer (2003) also present religiously motivated as increasing rapidly in scale and threat, even if not entirely new: Juergensmeyer notes that the State Department's list of terrorist organisations in 1980 did not include a single religiously inspired group. Hoffman, writing before 9/11, observed that "the modern advent of religious terrorism has not been confined to Iran, much less to the Middle East or to Islam: since the 1980s it has involved elements of all the world's major religions and, in some cases, smaller sects or cults as well".

Just as there is no shortage of work claiming the emergence of a new kind of terrorism, there is almost as much attempting to debunk this claim. Tucker (2001) challenges each of the supposed characteristics of new terrorism (such as its networked structure, or its greater ambition for mass-casualty attacks), and points to the continuity of terrorist organisations stemming from "a common source in the informal networked character of Sunni Islam". Duyvesteyn (2004) also argues that earlier terrorist movements operated transnationally and that the traditional terrorist structure was in several cases based on networks.

More recent and historically informed studies have identified elements of novelty not in terrorism as a whole but in the 'global jihadist' or 'Salafi-jihadist' manifestations. Gleave (2014) sees the 1991 Gulf War as the catalyst which transformed a theory of transnational jihad, developed largely in response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, into a more aggressive creed. Maher (2015) argues for a more recent conflict – the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq – as the progenitor of a new doctrine of militancy. Although elements of Salafi-jihadism emerged in the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s, these ideas become more "concrete, coherent and discernible" in Iraq. Maher argues that conflicts are the crucibles in which Salafi-jihadism has emerged and mutated into the form we see today,

which is unsurprising given that doctrine and jurisprudence is both required in and challenged by war-fighting.

Novelty: Techniques

The terrorism studies literature contained much debate after 9/11 over whether Islamist extremists were prepared or preparing to carry out mass-casualty attacks using chemical or biological or radiological weapons. Evidence recovered from Al Qaida laboratories in Afghanistan, for example, suggested that they were actively researching unconventional weapons, and there have been periodic cases (including in the UK) of Al Qaida-affiliated groups planning to use chemical or radiological substances. There are assertions that this marks Islamist extremists out from other groups, although proponents of 'new terrorism' theories such as Hoffman also acknowledge the use of chemical weapons by groups such as Aum Shirinkyo in Japan. Despite these well-founded concerns, however, the history of Islamist militancy since 9/11 is perhaps more remarkable for the relative lack of novel techniques such as chemical weapons, which are still used – if they are used at all – by states.

The phenomenon of suicide attacks has attracted particular attention from academics, especially since 9/11, following the greater prominence such methods gained with that event and the sharp statistical rise as a result of attacks in post-2003 Iraq. Given that mental illness – the main determinant of suicide – is almost completely absent from suicide attackers (Merari, 2005), scholars have sought political or political-economic explanations for the incidence of suicide attacks. Pape concludes that suicide terrorism is usually a response to occupation of a homeland by a democratic enemy: in this analysis suicide attacks are part of a negotiation by a subject people seeking to regain territory. While this works with the cases selected by Pape, his focus on nationalist-separatist groups means that religiously-framed conflicts remain largely unexamined. Several writers draw on economics to explain the phenomenon. Bloom (2005) claims to engage directly with religious conflicts and concludes similarly to Pape that suicide bombing is a tactic of "coercive bargaining" but adds an additional dimension – its effect on domestic supporters. As popular support for suicide bombing during the Second Intifada attests, it can have a surprisingly positive effect on communities who both supply the attackers and have to withstand the reprisals. Bloom's theory of 'outbidding' is relevant here: groups in competition for support win "market share" through greater commitment to

martyrdom. One weakness with Bloom's approach is that, although her data includes religious terrorists, she does not examine the emotional or intellectual linkages between religion and terrorist tactics in any depth.

Berman (2009) argues that the best predictor of suicide attacks is not theology but the hardness of the target: where a group's targets are poorly defended, suicide attacks are simply unnecessary. He suggests from this that religiously inspired terrorists may be the only ones with the commitment required to survive in countries such as Israel where targets have been significantly hardened: suicide bombing thus is usually a marker of religious violence. Berman's analysis is, however, flawed. First, he fails to take into account evidence that, for some groups (such as AQI), suicide attacks are an end in themselves as well as a means to attack a target. (Al-Zarqawi was quite explicit about this in his correspondence with Al-Zawahiri.) Second, and in common with many writers on this topic, he conflates different groups which have completely divergent aims and ideologies (Al-Qaida, Hamas, and Hizbollah). Third, he acknowledges but then appears to ignore the adoption of suicide bombing by Marxist-Leninist groups, notably the LTTE in Sri Lanka (which perpetrated more suicide bombings than any other group prior to 2003) but also the PKK in Turkey.

Gambetta's more historically informed analysis (2004) identifies five generalisations that can be made about suicide attacks: they are mounted by organisations, not individuals; they are mounted by a very wide range of groups (not just Islamists); none of the groups use suicide methods exclusively; the groups involved either have a community that supports radical action or are unrooted, transnational movements; all are carried out by the weaker side in a conflict – although they are often used by organisations that are growing in strength, such as Hizbollah. Suicide attacks are "a weapon of last resort for some, but for others they seem a means of aggressively building up and establishing an organisation by killing *and* by dying" (261). Religious motivation is conspicuous by its absence from this list, as is Islamism: Gambetta's figures, now dated, show only a third of suicide attacks were mounted by Islamists. Nevertheless, Gambetta does speculate that the "tradition of combative martyrdom" in Islam may explain why Christianity or Buddhism has not, so far, produced organisations given to suicide attacks. He also identifies Islamists as part inspiration behind the late-twentieth and twenty-first-century suicide attack – but Shi'a not Sunni Islamists. The wave of suicide attacks (1981-84) in the Lebanese civil war is particularly associated with Hizbollah and their sponsors

in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which brought to Lebanon an ethic of martyrdom from Iran's conduct of the 1980-88 war with Iraq. But imitation of Hizbollah's tactics spread beyond Shi'a Islamism to secular groups and to Al-Qaida, whose East African embassy bombings in 1998 were modelled on Hizbollah's attacks on the US embassy, the US marines and the French headquarters in Beirut in 1983 (Horowitz, 2010). The technique thus spread through a process of diffusion and imitation, but it remains nonetheless difficult to explain why it was not adopted by every Islamist group (Horowitz, 2010). What is important here is not that the tactic of suicide attacks is in itself new – instances can be found throughout human history – but its diffusion, transnational adoption, and frequency in Islamist extremism are unprecedented (Moghadam, 2006).

Novelty: Participants

The Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIL have refocused attention on foreign fighters, which is perceived to be a largely recent phenomenon and associated especially with Islamist violent extremism (Hegghammer, 2010). This can be attributed to two effects: the emergence of an ideology of transnational participation in Islamist thinking in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, and the growing number of conflicts in failed, post-colonial states with Muslim majorities or significant minorities. However, while the scale of the phenomenon may be unprecedented, it is not in itself new. Malet (2013) shows that foreign fighters have been a fact of conflicts since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and probably for longer, and they are by no means confined to Islamists. Indeed, while foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq may now have passed the 20,000 believed to have joined the conflict in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Neumann, 2015), it is worth remembering that around 32,000 foreigners fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39).

Scale and Impact

Fettweis (2009) claims that ideological terrorists do not seem to be constrained by rational strategic limitations in comparison with nationalists, and search for the most destructive weapons available to inflict the maximum amount of damage on people and property. As discussed above, studies such as Neumann's posit the novelty of 'new terrorism' includes its aim to commit mass-casualty attacks. The lethality of religiously inspired terrorism, and Islamist extremism in particular, has attracted significant attention. Hoffman, for example, writing before 9/11 identified a trend of increasing lethality in the 1990s and asserts that all major terrorist attacks in the decade had a religious

dimension, and noted that in 1995 religious terrorists carried out only a quarter of attacks but were responsible for 58% of deaths. (Much rests on his definition of religious; the anti-colonialist Real IRA, for instance, killed 22 and injured 220 in a single attack in 1998.) Hoffman therefore attributes increasing lethality to religious motivation: religious extremist groups have "different value systems, mechanisms of legitimization and justification, concepts of morality, and world-view [...] For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are consequently unconstrained by the political, moral or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists." In addition, he asserts that religious terrorists are unconstrained by the need for popular support, leading to "a sanctioning of almost limitless violence against a virtually open-ended category of targets".

While the facts appear to bear out his conclusion that increasing lethality is a result of religious motivation, there are competing explanations. Gambetta (2004) suggests that the availability of technology is a factor. Bloom's (2005) concept of concept of 'outbidding' explains increasing lethality as an effect of inter-group competition. Bloom's example – suicide bombings in Israel/Palestine during the Second Intifada – fits her theory neatly, and shows that the competition does not necessarily involve religious groups, as Fatah's militias took to suicide bombing in competition with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Competition can then lead to an "escalation trap" (Neumann and Smith, 2007) as, in some contexts, groups can then lose support and legitimacy when populations become exhausted or disgusted by their increasing violence. (Something like this may have occurred in Iraq in the 2007-09 period.) LaFree (2010) presents empirical data from the START database at the University of Maryland on terrorist events from 1970 to 2007 which shows that the number of fatal terrorist attacks was declining prior to 9/11 but then rose sharply, and that increasing lethality is particularly evident in Iraq, which suffered more terrorism than any other country despite the 37-year time-span of the data. Pinker (2011) uses the same dataset to argue that terrorism is actually becoming less lethal, as the number of fatalities per 100,000 people from the 1970s to 2005 was broadly downwards. However, Pinker's data misses the upsurge in fatalities in Iraq in 2006-07, and the later upsurges in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria (RAND, n.d.).[2] Nevertheless, taking

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[2] Research based on terrorism databases is inevitably problematic, as compilers have to make assumptions to develop selection criteria. In particular, inclusion of violence by parties in non-internal armed conflicts tends to inflate terrorism statistics significantly – but only a very narrow definition of terrorism would exclude all such incidents. The US State

this longer view also shows that the vast majority of terrorist attacks worldwide still kill few people (being directed against property), and that by 2007 the most lethal terrorist groups were the Maoist Shining Path (Peru) and the Marxist-Leninist LTTE (Sri Lanka). Berman (2009), an economist, also uses empirical data showing a post-9/11 surge in lethality, although his data (from the US State Department) disagrees with LaFree's, and presents Islamist groups as being far more lethal than secular ones, both in aggregate and per attack. Berman concludes that the "threat from modern religious terrorist organisations is unprecedented".

Piazza (2009), using empirical evidence, helpfully disaggregates Islamist terrorists into "strategic groups" such as Hamas which, despite claiming to be motivated by religious aims, have similar aims to nationalist-separatist groups (and are using terrorism incidentally), and "abstract/universal" groups such as Al-Qaida and its affiliates which are utopian in aim and for which violence is primarily expressive rather than instrumental. Unsurprisingly, Piazza concludes that it is the latter which accounts for the greater lethality of recent terrorist groups, while groups lacking an Al-Qaida affiliation are no more lethal than any other.

At least one study (albeit a somewhat dated one) questions the empirical basis for increasing lethality. Tucker (2001) develops a "lethality index" for international terrorism and claims that the greatest percentage increase in lethality occurred in late 1970s. Since then lethality has rested at a higher plateau rather than surged ahead, adding that the "claim that there is a tendency toward mass-casualty attacks rests, then, on a very few cases compared to the total number of international terrorist attacks." He concludes that strategic and state-sponsored terrorism, rather than the transnational and ideological variety, has always posed the greatest risk.

There is little research specifically focusing on the vulnerability of communities to Islamist violent extremism as opposed to other types. Countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches increasingly highlight the need to build resilience in communities (Zeiger and Aly, 2015). The fact that Muslim-majority countries tend to have lower state capacity has been suggested as an explanation for the higher levels of violence in them (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

Department stopped publishing its terrorism statistics report (*Patterns of Global Terrorism*) after 2003, partly because the issue of selection criteria became so controversial. From 2004, it published instead a qualitative analysis, *Country Reports on Terrorism*.

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