

# Security Studies and Terrorism Studies – Common Problems and Challenges

by Alex P. Schmid

[ Remarks made on the occasion of the INIS Award Ceremony, 2 December 2022 ]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning! It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here. I wish to thank Prof. Trifunovic and his colleagues for inviting me and for giving me this award. All I can give back to you at this moment beyond the words “Thank you” are some reflections on Security Studies and Terrorism Studies. Tomorrow, I will offer you some broader reflections on “Terrorist and Non-Terrorist Threats to European Security”.

Security studies have a long tradition but under different names, ranging from Polemology - which I used to teach at Leiden University - to Defence Studies and Peace research. Terrorism studies are much younger. There are differences and commonalities between the concepts of security and terrorism. When I came into the field of terrorism studies in the 1970s, it was not a discipline of its own but part of the small field of counter-insurgency studies. That terrorism studies split from counter-insurgency studies was arguably a good development since it took it out of the exclusive hands of the military - although the military is still the dominant force in counter-terrorism, next to law enforcement and intelligence agencies. To some extent terrorism studies also emerged from conflict studies. Conflict studies are still closely linked to terrorism studies as can be seen from the title of the leading journal ‘Studies in Conflict and Terrorism’ (SCT) which is the result of a merger between the journal *Terrorism* [edited by Yonah Alexander] that goes back to 1977 and the journal *Conflict* with which it merged in 1992 and which has ever since been edited by Bruce Hoffman. Its main rival is “Terrorism and Political Violence” (TPV), which was founded by David Rapoport in 1988 [1] For a number of years I was Rapoport’s co-editor of TPV. The title embeds Terrorism Studies in the wider field of political violence studies.

The number of journals is an indication of the health of a discipline. The Security Science Journal of INIS is now three years old and while not the first in the field it has the ambition to enhance the quality of security studies to a science. We also see this trend in the field of terrorism studies where my colleague at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), Teun van Dongen, published his dissertation under the ambitious title “The Science of Fighting Terrorism”. [2] Others, like Boaz Ganor of the Reichman University in Herzliya ,

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[1] In addition to these three, there are dozens of print and electronic journals with “Terrorism” in their title, including my own ‘Perspectives on Terrorism’. Cf. Judith Tinnes. “A Resources List for Terrorism Research: Journals, Websites, Bibliographies (2022 Edition)”. *Perspectives on Terrorism* , Vol. XVI, Issue 4, (August 2022), pp. 64-101.

[2] Teun van Dongen. *The Science of Fighting Terrorism : The Relation Between Terrorist Actor Type and Counterterrorism Effectiveness*. Leiden: Ph.D. Thesis, 2014.

however, still talk about “The Art of Counter-Terrorism”<sup>[3]</sup> echoing Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War” which was written in China some 2500 years ago.<sup>[4]</sup>

This raises the question when a field of study becomes a scientific and academic discipline like, for instance, astronomy emerging from astrology and chemistry from alchemy.

According to Clifton Smith and David Brooks in their book “Security Science” (2013), some of the characteristics of a discipline are these:<sup>[5]</sup>

1. *Body of knowledge:* A well-defined and inclusive body of knowledge;
2. *Structure of knowledge:* An internal structure of the knowledge, achieved through internal relationships between concepts so that consistency and logic prevail.
3. *Concepts and principles:* The building blocks of the knowledge of a discipline are concepts, and the relationships between concepts are governed by principles.
4. *Theories:* Theories are predictive in function and provide the ultimate test for a discipline, as outcomes can be predicted.

I can touch here only some of these characteristics, starting with the issue of definition. Do we have “A well-defined and inclusive body of knowledge” in the field of Security Studies? In the field of Terrorism Studies, the definition issue is hotly contested and politicized and has still not been fully resolved as legal definitions by governments vary from country to country, despite regional and UN efforts trying to harmonize them. In the field of academia, there has been more progress as there is now, since 2011, an academic consensus definition of terrorism which has gone through three cycles of revisions, based on feedback from the academic community. However, there is still a gap between legal and social science definitions.<sup>[6]</sup>

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[<sup>3</sup>] Professor Boaz Ganor, Dean and Ronald Lauder Chair for Counter-Terrorism at the Lauder School of Government, spoke at a presentation by the Army Leader Exchange on “The Art of Counter-Terrorism” on Aug. 17, 2017 at the Lewis and Clark Center, Fort Leavenworth.

[<sup>4</sup>] Sun Tsu. *The Art of War*. New York: Viking, 2002.

[<sup>5</sup>] Clifton L. Smith and David J. Brooks. *Security Science. The Theory and Practice of Security*. Amsterdam: Elsevier 2013, p.1.

[<sup>6</sup>] Two examples:

- (i) *Legal definition by Ben Saul (2006):* Any serious, violent, criminal act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury, or to endanger life, including by acts against property; where committed outside an armed conflict; for a political, ideological, religious, or ethnic purpose; and where intended to create extreme fear in a person, group, or the general public, and: (a) seriously intimidate a population or part of a population, or (b) unduly compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act. - Ben Saul (2006): *Defining Terrorism in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp.65-66.
- (ii) *Academic Consensus Definition (Schmid, 2011):* Terrorism refers, on the one hand, to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties. Terrorism as a tactic is employed in *three main contexts*: (i) illegal state repression, (ii) propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict and (iii) as an illicit tactic of irregular warfare employed by state- and non-state actors. - Cit Alex P.

In the field of security studies, you also have a definition problem although the term is not so politically loaded as in the case of terrorism. While terrorism has strong negative connotations [7] – [almost] nobody wants to be called a terrorist, - security has definitely positive connotations.

In both fields there are narrow and broad definitions. For instance, the German term for security is “Sicherheit” and it includes not only the concept of security but also the one of safety.[8] In some other languages security has a more narrow meaning, referring mainly to the protection of individuals or groups from hostile forces and, secondarily, to resilience against potential harm to one’s well-being.

In both fields – terrorism studies and security studies - there has been a proliferation of sub-types. In the field of terrorism, there are at least two dozen sub-types, ranging from lone actor- and single issue- and suicide-terrorism to religious, radiological and cyber terrorism. Some of these are dubious; for instance, I have yet to see a single instance of real radiological terrorism or of real cyber terrorism.[9] There is lot of cyber crime, cyber warfare – but cyber-terrorism – not yet.

In the field of security studies, you also have many, partly overlapping sub-types of security:

- Human Security
- Homeland Security
- National Security
- Border Security
- International Security
- Global Security
- Cooperative Security
- Shared Security
- Common Security

...plus a range of other securities, including Food Security, Social Security, Energy Security and Cyber Security.

Given this broad range, it appears impossible to develop a scientific theory of security valid for all types and categories. However, to be “scientific” you do not need to have a predictive theory which in the social sciences is a rarity anyway; it is enough that your method of data

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Schmid. *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. New York and London: Routledge, 2011, p. 86.

[8] Safety refers more to the absence or the low risk of hazards and accidents while security refers more to the absence or low vulnerability to hostile attacks. – Cf. C.L. Smith and D.J. Brooks, op. cit., p. 9.

[9] For an extended discussion of typologies, see: Sarah V. Marsden and Alex P. Schmid (2011): “Typologies of Terrorism and Political Violence”. In: Alex P. Schmid (Ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London and New York, pp. 158-200.

collection and processing is consistent and transparent so that it can be reproduced by others and tested in different contexts to see whether it is valid at different times in different places.

In the field of Terrorism Studies, the only grand theory that withstood the test of replicability reasonably well is the four waves of terrorism theory presented shortly after 9/11 2001 by David Rapoport. Recently Prof. Rapoport expanded on his original theory in the volume “Waves of Global Terrorism” [10]. His cyclical approach to the surge and decline of four waves of terrorism is generational in nature, with each generation lasting approximately 40 years. Rapoport identified first an Anarchist wave (1879-1920s), then an Anticolonial wave (1919-1960s), then a third New Left wave (1960s-1990s) and finally a fourth Religious wave (1979-2020s). It has been tested by others and was by and large confirmed. However, it related only to terrorism by non-state terrorists operating from the underground. It does not refer to state terrorists or to paramilitary groups like the fascists and national socialists who operated openly in Italy and Germany as well as elsewhere in the period between the two world wars and in some places beyond.

On the other side of the fence, terrorists also have “theories” of which tactics lead to success. While non-state terrorists hope that their “theory” is able to provoking a revolution by a combination of propaganda and intimidating atrocities, Rapoport’s study showed that, for instance, for the third New Left wave of terrorism - which lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s and which included 404 groups (212 ‘separatists’ and 192 ‘revolutionaries’) - only about two percent were successful in achieving at least one important original aim .[11]

In the field of security studies, promising hypotheses will also have to be of limited range to be applicable and testable. Most theorizing has been done in the field of national security with realist theories favouring deterrence through superior military power while more liberal theories favour the strengthening of cooperative ties to secure international peace.

The current international security system still goes back to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 which brought an end to most religious inter-wars in Europe by the new norm not to interfere in other countries internal (at that time mainly religious) affairs. After the French revolution and the defeat of Napoleon, a readjustment of the international system was sought in the balance of power-based “Concert of Europe” emerging from the Vienna Congress of 1815. This revised system collapsed in 1914 when World War I broke out one month after Gavril Princip’s assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia in Sarajewo. Four empires collapsed in the following years: the German Reich, the Ottoman empire, the Russian empire and the Austrian-Hungarian empire while new states like Yugoslavia arose from the ashes of a war that caused twenty million deaths and an even greater amount of wounded people. To prevent another World War, the League of Nations was created in 1920 but the United States was not part of it. However, it failed to prevent a second World War. Today the rule-based liberal world order created in 1945 with the United Nations is under threat from authoritarian and totalitarian

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[10] David C. Rapoport. *Waves of Global Terrorism. From 1879 to the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. His four waves of terrorism: (i) the first Anarchist wave (1879-1920s), the second Anticolonial wave (1919-1960s), the third New Left wave (1960s-1990s) and the fourth Religious wave (1979-2020s).

[11] Idem, p. 185.

powers who belief in raw power politics. Today we witness violent conflicts in at least 35 countries [12] while the number of true democracies has declined and some authoritarian states moved further in the direction of totalitarianism, supported by new control technologies. The world order created in 1945 under American leadership is under threat and while it is not an ideal order, what China or Russia would offer us is bound to be much worse, while Europe still cannot get its act together.

We need new security concepts for the nearly 200 states comprising the United Nations. The old system is flawed. One problem is that the United Nations does not only consist of nations but of states. Many, perhaps most states are - or were - not nation-states. There are nations without a state – like the Kurds – and there are nations with more than one state like the Koreans. Nations are “imagined communities” and which people belongs to them based on culture, history, language, race or religion or a combination thereof is often contested. Two key concepts in international relations, “nation” and “people” have no generally recognized definitions in international law – they are the two “black holes” in the international system. This has implications for security: does one prioritize the protection of state sovereignty and “national security” or does one prioritize the protection of people’s human rights and individual “human security”?

In the field of terrorism we [13] had, in the United Nations offices in New York and Vienna a similar, though less consequential, controversy around 9/11: is terrorism primarily a form of **crime** or a form of **politics** by other (criminal) means? Which of the two – politics or crime – is considered predominant had implications for who in the United Nations should dealt with international terrorism: should it be the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna or the Department of Political Affairs and the Security Council in New York? As you know, New York won over Vienna and most of the Counter-Terrorism bureaucracy in the United Nations is now in New York and under the control of the UN Security Council. De facto, terrorism has, next to peace, development and human rights become a fourth chief issue area of the United Nations.

Today security is high on both national and international agendas and the time is right for Security Studies to become a full-blown scientific discipline. I hope that this conference will be an important step in this direction.

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[12] Cf. IISS calculation based on ACLED data; see URL: [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)

[13] From 1999 to 2005, I was Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of UNODC in Vienna.