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Researching Violent Extremism
The State of Play

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The study of violent extremism is entering a new phase, with shifts in academic focus and policy direction, as well as a host of new and continuing practical and ethical challenges.

This chapter will present an overview of the challenges ahead and discuss some strategies for improving the state of research.

INTRODUCTION

The field of terrorism studies has vastly expanded over the last two decades. As an illustrative example, the term "terrorism" has been mentioned in an average of more than 60,000 Google Scholar results per year since 2010 alone, including academic publications and cited works. While Google Scholar is an admittedly imprecise tool, the index provides some insights on relative trends in research on terrorism.

While almost 5,000 publications indexed on Google Scholar address, to a greater or lesser extent, the question of "root causes of terrorism, at the beginning of this marathon of output, which started soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, only a fractional number of indexed publications addressed "extremism." Given the nature of terrorist movements, however, this should be no great mystery. The root cause of terrorism is extremism.

Figure 1: Google Scholar Results per Year[1]

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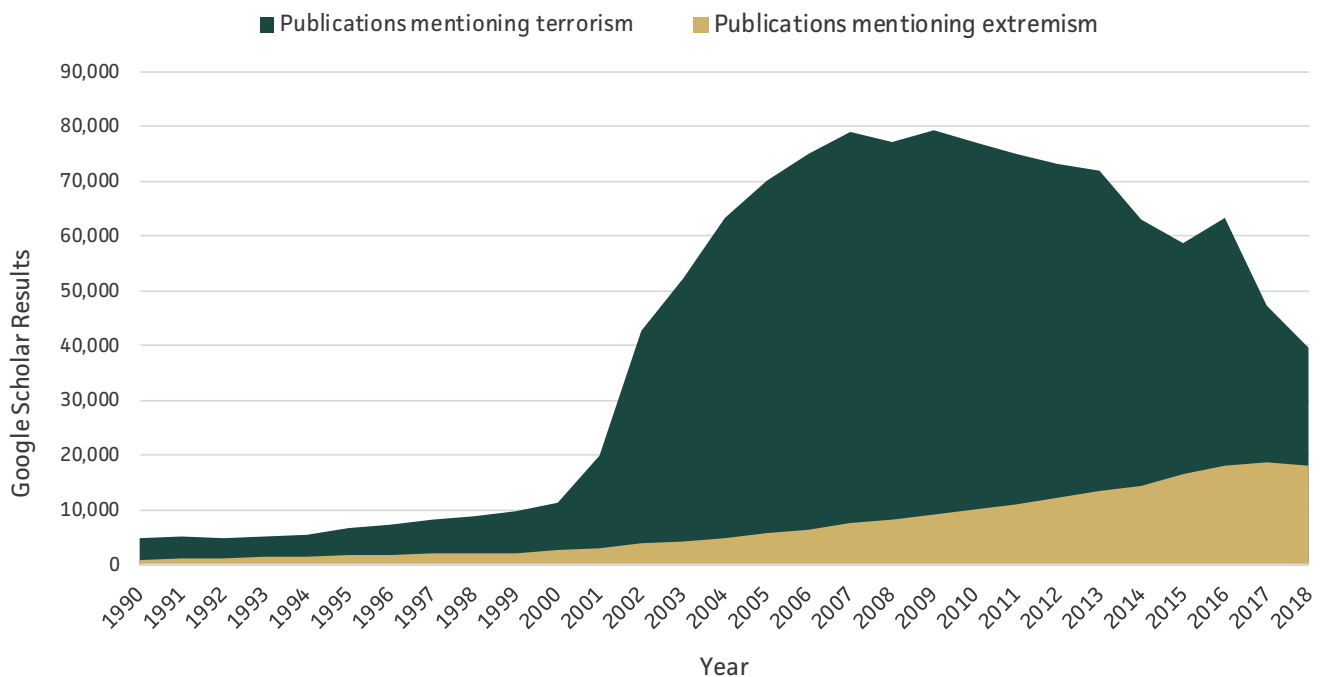
1   Google Scholar, accessed May 30, 2019.

In most real-world examples, and certainly in the most consequential cases with which the literature is concerned, terrorism is an activity carried out almost exclusively by extremists, in the service of extremist ideologies. If an extremist movement can do more than terrorism – for example, control a state's political apparatus, wage war, or commit genocide – it does so. If it cannot muster the resources or agree on a determination to carry out terrorism, it does less.

The more pertinent question for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike, therefore, is "what causes extremism?" Some might argue this is a distinction without a difference, but terrorism and extremism are absolutely not synonymous. Terrorism is just one tactic used by extremists; neither the deadliest nor the most disruptive. Studying terrorists to understand extremism is like studying baseball to understand sports. You can develop many useful insights, but not a complete picture.

Fortunately, the field is slowly starting to shift. After peaking in 2009, the number of publications mentioning terrorism began to decline, while the number of publications mentioning extremism has slowly but steadily increased. In significant part this is attributable to a shift in public policy, from a strict counterterrorism focus to programs aiming to counter or prevent violent extremism. Real-world events also played a role—the rise of the Islamic State and a revitalized global white nationalist scene, among other things, have cast a spotlight on extremist activities other than terrorism.

Despite this progress, much work remains. As academics and policy makers, we are in the earliest days of establishing extremism as a credible, cohesive field of study. This chapter will look at the major challenges ahead and discuss some future avenues of study. The remainder of this volume will explore a number of pragmatic approaches to various important research questions in the field, with a focus on applications to countering and preventing violent extremism.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES: ABUSE AND MISINTERPRETATION

The first challenge facing scholars of extremism is the issue of definitions, a challenge familiar to anyone who has worked on terrorism. Despite the prodigious output noted above, the field of terrorism studies has not reached hard consensus on a definition of terrorism, although a soft consensus has generally emerged around key issues—including the public nature of the act and the need for an expressly political or ideological motivation.

This definitional issue is much deeper with regard to "extremism," where even soft consensus is elusive. Compared to "terrorist", the "extremist" label is vaguer and more politically charged, and much more subject to abuse.

Many definitions of extremism are predicated on the idea that extremists are situated on the fringes of society and enjoy little mainstream support, parameters which are ill-equipped for scenarios in which extremist movements enjoy widespread popular support or political power. This problem extends around the globe, from European countries with extremist parties seated in parliaments, to the military-led violence perpetrated against Rohingya (deemed genocide by the U.S. House of Representatives and a United Nations human rights envoy[2]) and other ethnic and religious populations in Myanmar, a rising right-wing movement in India, and the persistent presence of jihadist and extremist Islamist political movements and insurgencies in the Middle East and Africa. Extremism manifests in many different places and takes different forms depending on the capabilities of extremist actors at any given point in history. Our current definitions do not encompass the entirety of the problem. To understand extremism, scholars require an empirical category that recognizes that social movements can evolve in and out of extremism over time.[3]

Abuse of the term "extremist" by those who hold power is another (and related) consequence of the definitional failure, and one of the most important. Russian law defines extremism in part as opposition to the state, and China has used extremism as a pretext to create detention camps for Uyghur Muslims.[4] While definitional abuse may be less overtly consequential in liberal democracies, it still results in the imbalanced application of security measures and social engineering against populations based on their proximity to the reins of political power.[5] The semantic discussion is directly tied to how security policies are applied in the real world; the extremist label empowers governments to take extraordinary action against designated groups and movements. This can and does result in human rights abuses.

Another common definitional issue revolves around stipulations that extremism must include the use of violence. Certainly, violent extremism is a particularly difficult problem and worthy of dedicated study (as in this volume), and limiting policies to violent extremism is an easy way to constrain some abuses of the broader extremist label. But within the very term "violent extremism" is the implicit assumption that not all extremists are violent. Extremist social movements can oscillate between violent and non-violent phases. In order to understand extremism as a field of study, the term and its conceptualization must also be able to travel with a movement between its violent and nonviolent phases, while seeking to minimize the prospect of abuse by those who hold power.

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2   "US House Designates Myanmar Campaign Against Rohingya Minority 'Genocide'," *Voice of America*, December 13, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-house-designates-myanmar-campaign-against-rohingya-minority-genocide; "Prosecute Myanmar Army Chief for Rohingya 'Genocide': UN Envoy," *Al Jazeera*, January 25, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/prosecute-myanmar-army-chief-rohingya-genocide-envoy-190125112535665.html.

3   James Griffiths, "Elections in EU and India Tilt the World's Largest Democracies Towards Populism," *CNN*, May 28, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/27/india/european-union-india-populism-intl/index.html.

4   J. Brian Gross, "Russia's War on Political and Religious Extremism: An Appraisal of the Law On Counteracting Extremist Activity," *BYU Law Review* (2003): 717; Rob Schmitz, "Reporter's Notebook: Uighurs Held For 'Extremist Thoughts' They Didn't Know They Had," *NPR,* May 7, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/05/07/720608802/reporters-notebook-uighurs-held-for-extremist-thoughts-they-didnt-know-they-had.

5   Joe Davidson, "Domestic Terrorism Story Renews Fears Over Trump's Coddling of White Nationalists," *Washington Post*, April 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/05/domestic-terrorism-story-renews-fears-over-trumps-coddling-of-white-nationalists/?utm_term=.af2591b57411.

While other issues may arise in the pursuit of academic and empirical rigor on the topic, the susceptibility of the term to political abuse and the risk of category errors[6] in academic study are the most important. These issues are more profound than the definitional ambiguity around terrorism, because the range of potential errors and misapplications is much wider. The author has addressed himself to the definition problem at some length and will continue to do so,[7] but solving the categorical challenge will require a much broader discussion and movement toward an eventual consensus among scholars in the field.

This is not a secondary issue, an ivory-tower indulgence, or a technicality. It is a critical problem with potentially disastrous real-world consequences. If you are skeptical about that assertion, ask the Uyghurs or the Rohingya what they think. They are suffering the direct and brutal consequences of our failure to clearly delineate an objective category.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY ISSUES: SILOS AND BALKANIZATION

Much like the field of terrorism studies and the search for "root causes," the study of extremism is multidisciplinary, which has resulted in some degree of Balkanization in research. Extremism can be approached from a number of perspectives, including political science, sociology, individual psychology, and social psychology—interrelated disciplines to be certain, but with distinct methodologies and bodies of literature.

One challenge in studying extremism is the reconciliation of individual and social dynamics—why groups radicalize versus why people radicalize, and how the group dynamics reflect and shape individual psychology.

In addition to these basic questions and the disciplines with which they are associated, a variety of other fields come into play when evaluating extremist activity, such as the study of war and conflict, the study of propaganda and persuasion, and social media research and analysis. The last category has received a significant amount of attention due to the large-scale and consequential adoption of social media by various extremist movements and social groupings, such as IS and the alt-right, and the relative ease of creating and quantifying social media datasets compared to other forms of field work. Because this subfield is relatively young, the interdisciplinary nature of the work is especially challenging, with contributions to the literature sometimes coming from people with backgrounds in hard sciences (such as computer scientists, data scientists and even physicists) rather than the social sciences.[8]

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6   Category errors are the conflation of unlike things into a single category, for instance studying fruit to draw conclusions about carrots..
7   J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
8   For example: Neil F. Johnson, et al., "New Online Ecology of Adversarial Aggregates: ISIS and Beyond," *Science* 352, no. 6292 (2016): 1459-63.

Some of this material would clearly benefit from a more holistic approach and subject-matter expertise on the specific movements being studied. Likewise, some research by social scientists and terrorism experts would also benefit from a better understanding of online dynamics and social network analysis. Overall, interdisciplinary collaboration is an important route to obtaining better and more rigorous outcomes. Researchers should consider seeking input from experts in specialties different from their own, especially social media researchers who specialize in metrics and network analysis but may lack substantial subject-matter expertise on the movement being examined.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES: DESIGNATIONS, BIASES, AND DISCLOSURES

Complicated ethical issues swirl around the question of how and whether to label a movement or individual as extremist.

With respect to movements, the definitional issues discussed in the preceding section are responsible for most of these complications. For example, when extremism is associated with unpopularity or lack of political power, dominant sociopolitical actors can use the label to stifle or even prosecute dissent. These issues are not likely to be resolved until a consensus on definition is reached, and of course, an academic consensus will not entirely prevent political actors from abusing the term.

A related but distinct issue pertains to the identification of individuals as extremists, or as being popular or influential among extremists. This problem is significant in social media research, although it is not confined to that realm. Online, the identification of individuals associated with extremist movements has obvious value for replication of social media studies and more broadly for a public understanding of the drivers of extremism—the individuals who are influential or popular within an extremist network shed light on many aspects of a movement, including its key issues and important leaders. Offline, such judgments may be considered very subjective, despite the best efforts of researchers to establish clear evidence and criteria (and not all experts and researchers put forth their best efforts). To cite just one example, consider the controversy over the Southern Poverty Law Center's identification of Maajid Nawaz, the founding chairman of Quilliam, as an anti-Muslim extremist.[9]

Yet even social media analytical approaches are almost always inferential to a greater or lesser degree, sifting large datasets to identify important users based on a probability of extremist involvement rather than a certainty. As such, most useful analytical approaches will inevitably identify some accounts that may be significant but are not indisputably extremist in nature, and some that are simply noise. For a simple example, a list of users following IS propaganda accounts online is certain to identify academic and

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9   Richard Cohen, "SPLC Statement Regarding Maajid Nawaz and the Quilliam Foundation," Southern Poverty Law Center, June 18, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/news/2018/06/18/splc-statement-regarding-maajid-nawaz-and-quilliam-foundation.

private researchers. Most amelioratory approaches will only reduce the presence of such users; virtually no approach can fully eliminate them.

To take a more significant problem, the analysis of a white nationalist network might identify accounts associated with certain news outlets as "influential" regardless of whether they openly endorse extremism. This may include people who carefully parse their language and publicly expressed views and who may object, plausibly or not,[10] to being identified as influential among extremists of a certain type. Finally, social media network analysis may identify accounts based on engagement with a user who has been targeted for harassment, rather than partaking of extremist or extremist-adjacent views.

While many academics can be trusted to navigate and understand such nuances, there are more substantial obstacles in how such research translates into popular media, news reports and opinion articles, particularly with respect to individuals who are popular among extremists but who eschew an explicit association.

For instance, scholars and researchers (including this author of this chapter) might encounter obstacles when attempting to review published research pertaining to how some U.S. and international extremists have explicitly supported U.S. President Donald Trump.[11] While this phenomenon is well-known to subject-matter experts studying white nationalism, it may be difficult for researchers to discuss their findings objectively without being accused of a partisan motivation. News coverage of such research may be sensationalized or politicized, omitting nuance or misrepresenting facts. This problem is greatly exacerbated when analysis identifies figures who are less well-known to the public and may face more serious negative consequences (such as loss of employment or social media platform) if they are associated with extremism by researchers.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to these issues, especially given that legal guidelines surrounding libel and slander may vary widely from one jurisdiction to the next, depending on the location of both the researchers and the named individuals. The consequences of identifying private individuals with extremist movements, especially when they have not explicitly adopted an extremist viewpoint, can be significant, whether that association is derived from social media or other sources. The field would benefit from a much more extensive, focused discussion of these issues and clear consensus-driven guidelines about to how to handle such situations going forward.

Finally, the study of extremism contains some inherent conflicts with respect to the political and religious orientations of researchers and the societies they inhabit, which are little discussed in the field. In

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10   Ari Feldman, "Ben Shapiro Helped Radicalize A Nazi Sympathizer Who Defaced Synagogue, The Man's Lawyer Says," *The Forward*, May 28, 2019, https://forward.com/fast-forward/425012/ben-shapiro-nazi-sympathizer-synagogue-swastika/.

11   Glenn Kessler, "Fact Checker: Donald Trump and David Duke: For the Record," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2016; Nick Robins-Early, "How Far-Right Extremists Abroad Have Adopted Trump's Symbols As Their Own," *Huffington Post*, April 6, 2019; J. M. Berger, "The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-Right Content on Twitter," *VOX-Pol*, October 15, 2018, https://www.voxpol.eu/new-research-report-the-alt-right-twitter-census-by-j-m-berger/.

order to study extremism at all, researchers and scholars must first identify movements and individuals as extremist or not. As alluded to previously, this can have many consequences for those so labelled, and a failure to properly identify a movement that is extremist in nature can give license to those who are exempted. Researchers are largely responsible for policing their own potential biases with respect to these questions.

The consequences of a formal or informal extremist designation range from small scales (stigma within certain social circles) to large (law enforcement scrutiny and even arrest). One place where this challenge is particularly visible is on social media, where a verdict of extremism can lead to deplatforming and other material consequences. Social media companies are currently struggling to establish baseline guidance for when to remove or limit the reach of users believed to be associated with extremism. These decisions are often headline-driven, and studies that produce significant mass media coverage almost certainly sway the process, which can be problematic if academic nuances are lost in the transition to front pages.

This leads to another widespread ethical challenge: sorting out the influence of funding sources on research priorities. This problem is both individual and institutional. On the individual level, many researchers (including myself) work closely with social media companies on a paid or unpaid basis to research issues related to content moderation. In addition to such consulting work, many studies of extremist activity online are funded by social media companies directly or through intermediaries. Social media companies may also choose to provide selected researchers with data that is not available to the general public, another form of influence on research topics.

This problem is not new, although its locus has shifted. Since September 11, governments have frequently funded terrorism studies. These are typically disclosed, but they nevertheless shape research agendas. Governments also hire individuals (including myself) as trainers, speakers, researchers, and consultants on terrorism and extremism, relationships that are not always disclosable.

Some effort should be made within the academy to examine how these funding streams allow funders to set the agenda with respect to both the type and the volume of research conducted, the potential effect on research outcomes, and institutional decision-making processes with respect to how research is funded. Social media companies and government agencies should also modify their use of non-disclosure agreements whenever possible in order to allow consultants to more fully disclose potential conflicts of interest. A substantial amount of work across the entirety of the field will be required to properly assess these issues. In the meantime, researchers should attempt to build more transparent funding portfolios for themselves, when practical, and consciously interrogate themselves about how their output is shaped by funding sources. This includes questioning whether potentially important or fruitful areas of research are being neglected due to a lack of funding opportunities—which in some cases may be caused by funders' desire to avoid certain topics.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES: SAFETY AND ACCESS

In addition to the practical issues discussed in the preceding sections, a number of additional challenges can be seen on the horizon.

Some of these, such as safety issues during field research, are not entirely new but may be intensified by evolving tactics and political situations. These include the increasing adoption of extremist practices such as execution of hostages and territorial control, as well as a continued hostile worldwide attitude toward journalists, media workers, and other people who publish facts—emanating not just from extremist movements themselves, but sometimes from governments in areas where extremist movements operate.[12]

To date, jihadist extremists have not systematically targeted researchers for potential violence outside of conflict zones. Indeed, groups such as al Qaeda have often sought to benefit from adversary research.[13] However, such dynamics could easily change, particularly with the rise of groups such as IS, whose targeting practices are more indiscriminate. As research increases on right-wing movements with a larger and more diffuse presence, researchers may need to be more conscious of potential threats closer to home. The exposure of private information online is tactic that is likely to increase from all hostile actors. Additional safety resources and training are needed for those operating in this space.

Virtual environments also present challenges, particularly in relation to online research in the era of deplatforming—the removal of extremist content and users from the most important social media outlets. As social media companies crack down on extremist content, some valuable resources become more difficult to obtain. This important problem and related issues are discussed throughout this volume. For purposes of this chapter, a short overview is sufficient.

To state the obvious, if researchers can't obtain data, they can't analyze it. Social media platforms have varying rules and guidelines with respect to material that has been removed, based in part on their user agreements and terms of service. In some cases, material that is removed on the grounds of extremism is not retained by the platform in any capacity, rendering it truly ephemeral. Even when the content is retained by a platform, there are no clear guidelines for how researchers may access it.

This can present problems in assessing current and historical movements, as a wealth of archival material can be found all over the Internet, especially on social and streaming platforms. To pick just one example, the historically notable lectures of the late Christian Identity ideologue Wesley Swift (1913-1970) are

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12 "Database of Journalists Killed," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed June 2, 2019, https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&sourceOfFire%5B%5D=Government%20Officials&sourceOfFire%5B%5D=Military%20Officials&sourceOfFire%5B%5D=Paramilitary%20Group&sourceOfFire%5B%5D=Political%20Group&start_year=1992&end_year=2019&group_by=year

13 "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=5.

widely available on major platforms. This material is important to researchers, but also to extremists; most of this material is posted online by Christian Identity adherents. Should this material be aggressively deplatformed, there are limited opportunities to discover it elsewhere.

While this obstacle can be overcome by committed researchers with deep knowledge of lower-visibility extremist platforms that have different incentives regarding the removal of content, it creates a gate-keeping effect for those who are newer to the field (discussed at more length by Charlie Winter).[14] The archiving of deplatformed material for use by qualified researchers would help mitigate this issue, as would specialized training and resources for new researchers on how to safely and ethically access lower-visibility platforms. Practical approaches to solving this problem can be made available through private-public partnerships.

Another practical challenge in deplatforming relates to the intersection of extremism and the boundaries of free speech. To date, the failure to define extremism and, to some extent, terrorism has resulted in a series of ad hoc decisions about which users are extremists and what content is allowed on social media, decisions which are then retroactively forged into policy positions. Slow progress is being made toward developing policies more soundly based on scholarship, but popular condemnation is still a major driver of deplatforming.

Another important area that companies are currently exploring is whether most or all extremist-associated content should be removed, or only the most problematic, aggressive, or violent examples.

The unfettered use of any given technological platform is not identical to the principle of free speech in democracies, which is more concerned with preventing government action against individuals based solely on their free expression of ideas. Social media platforms, however, are globally ubiquitous and free to the public and they have become essential for many people. Some users and activists may not distinguish between speech on social media and free speech broadly construed.

The hybrid nature of social media complicates these calculations. Virtually no one would argue for deplatforming email users based on content. In the minds of some users, social media is similarly situated, somewhere between a user's dining room table and the town square, spaces where free speech is protected. But even in the town square, harassment and threats of violence are generally not allowed. And social media's broadcasting element—the ability to reach massive worldwide audiences—makes it functionally similar to radio and television, spaces where speech is almost always regulated to some extent.

Social media companies also bear some degree of direct responsibility for the abuse of their platforms by extremists and other bad actors, especially when their business incentives and technical decisions directly empower and amplify that abuse.

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14   Charlie Winter, "Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation, and Trauma," *RESOLVE Network* (May 2019) https://www.resolvenet.org/research/researching-jihadist-propaganda-access-interpretation-and-trauma.

These issues will continue to present significant challenges to both the private and public sectors, as companies and governments grapple with emerging challenges and debate whether and how to regulate such hybrid platforms. The problem will likely never be fully resolved, due to shifting social mores and adaptive extremist tactics, but may be mitigated as new social media outlets emerge, especially if newcomers to the field reduce the centrality of viral content to business models and focus on building platforms based on realistic expectations about abuse by bad actors.

P/CVE ISSUES: POLICY PRIORITIES AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS

The increase in extremism research over the last 10 years was spurred in part by a shift in government policies from counterterrorism to preventing/countering violent extremism, with the latter intended to address extremism broadly as a social phenomenon and to reduce the impact of terrorism by reducing the number of people willing to employ it.[15] In many ways, this was a positive development, although the field has developed in fits and starts, with implementations of supposed remedies to extremism considerably preceding research on what remedies might be effective.

P/CVE initiatives were generously funded from about 2010 to 2016, but many programs boasted metrics for success (such as social media impressions and engagements) that did not directly pertain to whether they meaningfully prevented or countered extremism. The question is inherently difficult to answer, due to its counterfactual nature: It is not possible to fully know how many people did not radicalize due to a particular program's influence.

At this point, the evaluation problem is widely recognized in the field, and important preliminary research has been carried out to remediate the problem.[16] Williams, Horgan, and Evans (2016) have proposed a 12-point set of measurements addressing a number of issues clearly relevant to extremism.[17] Other schema address issues that are much less demonstrably relevant, such as "resilience" and "community engagement."[18] Several evaluations of specific programs and approaches have been conducted recently, including but not limited to Schuurman and Bakker (2016),[19] Bastug and Evlek (2016),[20] and Ferguson

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15 Gary LaFree and Joshua D. Freilich, "Government Policies for Counteracting Violent Extremism," *Annual Review of Criminology* 2 (2019): 383-404.

16 Amy-Jane Gielen, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1-19.

17 Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan, and William P. Evans, "Evaluation of a Multi-faceted, US Community-based, Muslim-led CVE Program," *National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice* (2016).

18 Gielen, "Countering Violent Extremism," 1-19.

19 Bart Schuurman and Edwin Bakker, "Reintegrating Jihadist Extremists: Evaluating a Dutch Initiative, 2013–2014," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 8, no. 1 (2016): 66-85.

20 Mehmet F. Bastug and Ugur K. Evlek, "Individual Disengagement and Deradicalization Pilot Program in Turkey: Methods and Outcomes," *Journal for Deradicalization* 8 (2016): 25-45.

(2016).[21] Additional efforts are currently underway, and many organizations are now working to include robust and relevant evaluation in the design of P/CVE programs from the outset.[22]

While the methodology of P/CVE is slowly improving, the political climate surrounding it has deteriorated. The most significant problem is the overabundance of programs and research targeting Muslim extremists relative to every other class, and the predication of many P/CVE programs on questionable or clearly wrong presumptions regarding the religious roots of extremism.[23] Extremism can be religious, racial, or nationalistic, among other possibilities, and there are clear similarities among these different types. The global extremist environment is extraordinarily diverse, from the resurgence of white nationalism in the West[24] to a state-led campaign of genocide in Myanmar[25] and beyond. Muslim extremists are not necessarily the most numerous or most destructive extremists at work in the world today, but they are certainly the most discussed and prioritized in policy and research circles.

The rise of right-wing political movements in the United States and Europe has additionally complicated the P/CVE environment, both in terms of reduced funding for credible efforts and limiting programs' focus on racist and nationalist extremism.[26] In addition, the prevailing political environment has empowered movements and individuals who are distinctly anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant, increasing the baseline skepticism of target audiences and diminishing community buy-in, problems that plagued P/CVE programs even under less problematic leadership.[27]

Some have argued that the best response to these developments is a return to terrorism prevention rather than focusing on P/CVE, and this argument has some obvious merits from the limited perspective of government policy.[28] There are many good reasons for healthy skepticism about the government's role in policies and programs that amount to social engineering, especially when policymakers turn a blind

21   Kate Ferguson, "Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies," *Reflections* 27 (2016): 28.

22   Todd C. Helmus, et al., "RAND Program Evaluation Toolkit for Countering Violent Extremism," *RAND Corporation* (2017); Joanna Hofman, et al., "Evaluating Interventions that Prevent or Counter Violent Extremism" *RAND Corporation* (2018); "Developing a Toolkit for Monitoring, Measurement and Evaluation for P/CVE," *Hedayah Center*, http://www.hedayahcenter.org/activites/758/2017/771/developing-a-toolkit-for-monitoring-measurement-and-evaluation-for-p-cve; "A New Tool Addresses the Challenge of Measuring CVE Impact," Hedayah Center, August 16, 2018, http://www.hedayahcenter.org/media-details/49/news/51/latest-news/916/a-new-tool-addresses-the-challenge-of-measuring-cve-impact.

23   Eric Rosand, "In Strategies to Counter Violent Extremism, Politics often Trump Evidence," Brookings Institution, May 6, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/06/in-strategies-to-counter-violent-extremism-politics-often-trumps-evidence/.

24   Sara Ganim, Chris Welch, and Nathaniel Meyersohn, "A Resurgence of White Nationalism': Hate Groups Spiked in 2016," *CNN Politics,* February 15, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/15/politics/hate-groups-spiked-in-2016/index.html.

25   Chris Beyrer and Adeeba Kamarulzaman, "Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar: The Rohingya Crisis and Human Rights," *The Lancet* 390, no. 10102 (2017): 1570-73.

26   Peter Beinart, "Trump Shut Programs to Counter Violent Extremism," *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/trump-shut-countering-violent-extremism-program/574237/.

27   Faiza Patel, Andrew Lindsay, and Sophia Den Uyl, "Countering Violent Extremism in the Trump Era," *Brennan Center for Justice*, June 15, 2018, https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/countering-violent-extremism-trump-era.

28   Haroro J. Ingram, "Terrorism Prevention in the United States," *George Washington University* (November 2018), https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Terrorism%20Prevention%20Policy%20Paper.pdf.

eye to extremists among their political supporters and fellow travelers or may themselves traffic in the tropes of extremism.

Yet a return to tactical priorities over the broader social problem hardly seems suited to our times. Whether or not government is the proper lodestar for P/CVE priorities, programs and funding, the study and countering of extremism is necessary and important work.

We must acknowledge that the recent focus on extremism in the academy and among community organizations has been empowered and at times directly subsidized by government spending and stated policy priorities. While technology companies have taken up some of the funding slack, they bring their own biases, and changes in the nature of government support for P/CVE has the potential to seriously diminish the size of the academic field.

However one assesses the exact role of government support in shaping terrorism and extremism studies, it is undeniable that scholars seeking to work on these issues have enjoyed a surplus of funding and attention for a decade or more. This has created incentives that not only fuel growth in the field but shape its focus—by funding and incentivizing programs and research that address jihadism at a higher rate than those that address white nationalism, for instance (although this is starting to change).

For all of these reasons, it is important that the field develop diverse and relatively independent funding streams. Changes to the government funding landscape will not result in an end to study, by any means, but it will make such study more difficult and create barriers to entry for younger researchers, who may lack the institutional clout to get ambitious projects approved in the absence of a surplus funding environment.

While there is no question that the field would benefit from turning a much more critical eye toward both programs and research,[29] we should be careful not to discourage unconventional approaches to an area of study that has suffered from an excess of conventionality.

On the other hand, P/CVE programs and research are likely to face increased pressure to produce concrete and quantifiable results, and this is not a bad thing. Most close observers of the scene would readily acknowledge that the surplus scenario has resulted in the funding of many weak programs that did not produce demonstrably useful (or even measurable) results. Countless blue-skies programs have been funded in order to satisfy the political imperative to do something, anything, about the perceived crisis, and many will not be missed.

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29 Ben Emmerson, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism: Framework Principles for Securing the Accountability of Public Officials for Gross or Systematic Human Rights Violations Committed in the Context of State Counter-terrorism Initiatives." *Human Rights Council* (2013).

Here, again, the continued lack of consensus on the definition and causes of extremism complicates prospects for the future. Unfortunately, programs will likely be selected for elimination in the same way they were first funded—based on political expediency, optimistic promises, and unproven or disproven assumptions, rather than on their rigor and objective merits. Researchers across the board should advocate for projects that are grounded and that produce concrete results. When undertaking more experimental projects, researchers should ground and contextualize expectations, rather than overselling untested strategies for reducing extremism.

CONCLUSION

This chapter reviewed the current state of research on extremism and violent extremism and looked at factors that will shape the field in the years to come.

While the field has clearly advanced in its approach to extremism and violent extremism contra terrorism, much work remains, including answering very basic questions about how to define and set boundaries around extremism as an academic area of study. The failure of definition has myriad practical consequences, including distortions to our basic understanding of the problem. The study of extremism is troubled by political pressures and biases, some overt and others implicit, which may emerge among researchers, institutions, and funding sources.

The establishment of a rigorous and objective definition of the phenomenon and the field would help ameliorate this problem and several other derivative issues.

Despite these challenges, the study of extremism has attracted many brilliant minds over the years, both before and after September 11. Important, landmark work has been done on the topic, even in the absence of a clear "extremism studies" discipline.

But the failure of definition has contributed to an environment that favors research on jihadism over all other ideologies. This narrow understanding of extremism impedes progress on life-and-death situations currently unfolding around the globe, where non-jihadists are engaged in ethnic cleansing, genocide, and mass incarceration based on ethnic and religious identities. Examples include the widely reported detention and "re-education" of Uyghur Muslims in China[30] and what the U.N. has deemed a "policy of apartheid" by Myanmar toward the Rohingya and other ethnic groups.[31] Unknown thousands have died, and millions more have been denied basic liberties. These cases are clear examples of the need to move past a terrorism-studies paradigm and to address extremism as rigorously and objectively as possible.

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30 Chris Buckley, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy, "How China Turned a City Into a Prison: A Surveillance State Reaches New Heights," *New York Times*, April 4, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html.

31 Emanuel Stoakes and Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Myanmar: UN threatens to withdraw aid over 'policy of apartheid' against Rohingya," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/17/myanmar-un-threatens-to-withdraw-aid-over-policy-of-apartheid-against-rohingya.

To be sure, the nature of academia means that we will never see an absolutely firm consensus. Realistically, the process will be similar to the iterative definition of terrorism that has emerged since September 11. While an absolute consensus still eludes, there is a general consensus (within academia at least) that provides a relatively stable category for the study of terrorism as ideologically motivated public violence by nonstate actors, with some continued debate around the margins.

While some opening volleys have been fired with respect to starting this iterative process for the definition of extremism,[32] these efforts must be significantly expanded. This is neither an academic, nor an "academic" distinction. Real people are impacted every day by the failure to rigorously define extremism.

Concurrent with and complementary to these efforts, research into extremism and violent extremism will have to adapt to a changing political and funding environment. While this will present challenges, there is much to be gained by establishing a well-defined field with greater independence and more academic rigor. The potential shrinkage of the post-9/11 surplus-funding environment may lead to more diverse, independent and transparent funding streams with different incentive structures. Scholars may feel more inclined and more empowered to focus attention where they think it belongs, rather than tailoring their research to avail themselves of large pots of available funding.

However, the evolving funding environment may also reduce overall output, discourage innovation and create barriers to entry for young scholars. Here, again, an improved definition and the formalization of an extremism studies discipline is needed to help mitigate problems by regularizing the academic environment, prioritizing sound research over the headline-of-the-day, and making the field less sensitive to the prevailing political winds. Researchers should confront these issues directly, pushing back on institutional obstacles to craft, present, and defend definitions of extremism that are clearly delineated and as objective as possible. This is necessary in order to resolve the academic deficiencies that arise from the use of unarticulated or overly relative definitions, as well as to force consideration of current, pressing, and deadly extremist violence in contexts that may not currently benefit from the full force of scholarly study due to political pressures or category instability. This is crucial both for academic integrity and for the advancement of fair and just policies.

Fortunately, some strides have been made recently in the comparative and longitudinal study of extremist violence and narratives, primarily examining jihadist versus right-wing movements. These efforts should be expanded to include a wider variety of content. By promoting this change in the field, we can advance the study of all forms of extremism, including in already established areas such as jihadism, because comparative study will inevitably produce important insights that are not available from the study of single movements.

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32   Astrid Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (2017); Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT-The Hague* 97, no. 1 (2013): 22; Sam Jackson, "Non-normative Political Extremism: Reclaiming a Concept's Analytical Utility," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 2 (2019): 244-259; Berger, *Extremism* (2018).

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