

Open Source Jihad

Looking back at the beginnings of academic research on terrorism just over 40 years ago, it is extraordinary to see that what was once a marginal subject for social science has developed into a full-fledged program of “terrorism studies.”

– Martha Crenshaw

The message as a whole then becomes paradoxical and the paradoxes and contradictions manifest in different ways: exceptional circumstances yet normal; outside society yet within; the threat from small groups yet measures for everyone.

– Andrés Perezalón

The Looming Specter of 9/11

Open Source Jihad, the main title of this Element, is taken from a recurring section in Al-Qaida on the Arabic Peninsula’s (AQAP) magazine *Inspire*. The section is informative and describes various forms of techniques that might come in handy for the “jihadist” planning an attack in the West. The instructions range from disassembling and cleaning an AK47, shooting stances with your newly cleaned weapon, smuggling a bomb onto an airplane, and stalking high-value targets. *Open Source Jihad* is also a suitable name for the relatively recent academic field of terrorism studies and especially so the subfield focusing on “Islamic terrorism.” Terrorism studies emerged in the 1970s but virtually exploded after 9/11.¹ Since then, the publication of academic peer-reviewed articles rose by 300 percent the following year; some estimations show that a new book is being published every sixth hour.² The thirst for knowledge about

¹ See Andrew Silke, “The Devil You Know: Continuing problems with research on terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13(4) (2001), 1–14.

² Magnus Ranstorp, “Mapping Terrorism Studies After 9/11: An academic field of old problems and new prospects,” in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda*, eds.

terrorism still seems never ending. Today terrorism studies have developed into a vast academic field with several renowned academic journals (e.g., *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, and *Critical Studies on Terrorism*), comprehensive encyclopedias of terrorism,³ founding authors,⁴ and academic experts frequently appearing in the news media.⁵

However, the study of terrorism has been and still is suffering from a number of shortcomings, not least since terrorism has been treated like an open source for speculation, moralizing, and career opportunities.⁶ Michel Stohl even argues that the field is maintained “on a diet of fast food research: quick, cheap, ready-to-hand and nutritionally dubious.”⁷ One example is the former terrorism expert Alexis Debat, who managed to rise to the high ranks in the world of US think tanks and news media through a made-up CV and an impressive bundle of lies.⁸ Regarding the academic

Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroem Gunning (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 17.

³ Peter Chalk, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 2012); James Ciment, ed., *World Terrorism: An encyclopedia of political violence from ancient times to the post-9/11 era* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Martha Crenshaw and John Pimlott, eds., *International Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Harvey W. Kushner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (London: Sage Publications, 2003); Gus Martin, ed., *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (London: Sage Publications, 2011).

⁴ E.g., Martha Crenshaw, Walter Laqueur, and Robert Pape.

⁵ In Europe, e.g., Gilles Kepel, Magnus Ranstorp, and Olivier Roy.

⁶ See Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror. How Experts Invented “Terrorism”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ Michael Stohl, “Don’t Confuse Me with the Facts: Knowledge claims and terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(1) (2012), 32 [31–49].

⁸ Guillemette Faure and Pascal Riché, “Comment Alexis Debat a trompé tout Washington,” *Rue 89*, September 14, 2010, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2007/09/14/comment-alexis-debat-a-trompe-tout-washington-2873>.

Open Source Jihad

study of terrorism, Richard Jackson argues that the orthodox or mainstream school of terrorism (MTS) is suffering from bias in terms of using poor methods and theories, being state-centric, being uncritical, and having compromisingly close ties to state interests.⁹ As such, terrorism has developed into an objective backdrop for understanding and interpreting contemporary violent acts directed against nation-states while state violence is usually excluded.¹⁰ Although the whole field of mainstream terrorism studies should not be reduced to these points, examples of publications bearing these traits are not hard to find. One example is the Swedish report *Hot mot demokrati och värdegrund – en lägesbild från Malmö* (A Threat Against Democracy – The Case of Malmö) published in 2009.

Knowledge without Sources

The report was ordered by the then-liberal-conservative Swedish government that called upon the Center for Assymetric Threat and Terrorism Studies (CATS) at the Swedish National Defense College to produce a research overview of the state of affairs regarding “extremism prone to violence [våldsbejakande extremism] and radicalisation.”¹¹ The report turned out to be a case study of the neighborhood of Rosengård in Malmö, Sweden’s third-largest city. Rosengård in public debate is almost exclusively associated with

⁹ Richard Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” *European Political Science* 6(3) (2007), 244–251. See also Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming* (London: Verso, 2014), 21.

¹⁰ See Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹ Magnus Ranstorp and Josefine Dos Santos, *Hot mot demokrati och värdegrund – en lägesbild från Malmö* (Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan, 2009a), accessed February 15, 2016, www.mah.se/upload/Forskningscentrum/MIM/2009%20Seminars/vardegrund_175076a.pdf.

such negative categories as violence, car burnings, Islamization, and racism against whites: an image that is uncritically reproduced in the report. In an article summarizing the report, the authors state that out of 22,000 inhabitants, 60 percent of the population were born outside Sweden and another 26 percent have parents born outside Sweden. According to the authors, this large population of first- and so-called second-generation immigrants suffer “extreme segregation” that leads to “an evil spiral” of “bitterness and contempt” resulting in isolation from Swedish society. While the authors appear to embark on a discussion of discrimination and the high thresholds for fully entering into the Swedish society, the authors stress that the main problem of the population in Rosengård is a lack of comprehension of basic values, democracy, and equality. This is seen, not least, in how “ultra-radical Islamists” who preach an extremist Islamist agenda based on hate against the West have created a veritable *Hisbah* – religious police forcing women to veil, separating young boys and girls, and ultimately enforcing patriarchal structures of power.¹² A dire situation indeed.

The picture painted of Rosengård could just as well be that of any other stigmatized borough, suburb, or big city neighborhood such as Clichy-sous-Bois in Paris, Molenbeek in Brussels, or Tower Hamlets in London. These are the infamous “no-go zones” for the average non-Muslim, white citizen.¹³ At least this is what was suggested on Fox News by the American security analyst

¹² Magnus Ranstorp and Josefine Dos Santos, “Kommuner måste hejda extremism,” Svenska Dadbladet, January 28, 2009, accessed January 11, 2016, www.svd.se/kommuner-maste-hejda-extremism.

¹³ Carol Matlack, “Debunking the Myth of Muslim-Only Zones in Major European Cities: Stories about big Western cities surrendering neighborhoods to control of Islamist extremists are shocking—and totally false,” *Bloomberg Business*, January 14, 2015, accessed February 12, 2016, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-14/debunking-the-muslim-nogo-zone-myth.

Open Source Jihad

Nolan Peterson, who, in the wake of the attacks in Paris in January 2015, declared that areas in central Paris reminded him of a Baghdad where Sharia law reigns.¹⁴ That these areas are also frequented by the average white beer-drinking and ham-eating hipster seemed to have slipped through the observational lens of Peterson. Fox News and Peterson have been mocked by French news media for mistaking these zones for what are called Sensible Urban Zones (*Zones urbaines sensibles*),¹⁵ a designation that has to do more with class than anything else. However, there is an irony here. In France, the very idea of no-go zones is in itself not shocking; it is reproduced on a daily basis by politicians in French news media where it is most commonly associated with the metropolitan suburbs,¹⁶ as if Peterson was criticized more for getting the Parisian map wrong than the idea of the no-go zone itself.

Nonetheless, in the Swedish Report the authors set out to understand the degree of radicalization in Rosengård. The analysis draws its empirical material from thirty interviews conducted with state and municipal functionaries, mainly from the police, schools, and social services. As the authors state, their interest is primarily Islamic radicalization, which is noteworthy since this is treated as a commonsensical truism in need of no explanation. No field work in Rosengård

¹⁴ Fox News, “French ‘no-go zones’ in question after Paris terror attacks,” January 9, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/3980744730001/french-no-go-zones-in-question-after-paris-terror-attacks/?#sp=show-clips>.

¹⁵ E.g., Canal +. “*Le petit journal*,” January 14, 2015, accessed February 15, 2016, www.canalplus.fr/c-emissions/c-le-petit-journal/pid6515-le-petit-journal.html?vid=1197745.

¹⁶ Mustafa Dikeç, “Voices into Noises: Ideological determination of unarticulated justice movements,” *Space and Polity* 8(2) (2004), 191–208; Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An ethnography of urban policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Michel Kokoreff, *Sociologie des émeutes* (Paris: Payot, 2008); Laurent Mucchielli, *L’invention de la violence: Des peurs, des chiffres, des faites* (Paris: Fayard, 2011).

and no interviews with ultra-radical Islamists or with the Muslim youth these radicals were supposedly radicalizing are accounted for. Radicalization is taken as a fact, implicitly equivalent to Islamization, immigration, extremism, and violence. This is evident not least in the highly normative and leading formulations of the questions posed to the interview subjects.¹⁷ For example, the question “What are the motives leading to radicalization (hate against society/the West, the war in Iraq, negative personal experiences, etc.)?” not only assumes that radicalization exists, it also proposes answers to why it exists.

The authors present a number of criteria that might be a sign of radicalization. Considering that teenagers are the supposed main targets of radicalization, some of these criteria are indeed curious, for example, frequent mosque visits, growing a beard, watching foreign-TV broadcasts with violent content, practicing physically demanding sports, or lacking a father figure.¹⁸ Were it not for the criteria of travel to war zones and known jihadi training sites, the criteria could potentially be applicable to any devout or occasionally practicing Muslim teenager in Sweden. Moreover, nowhere do the authors state that these criteria have actually resulted in radicalization (i.e., “that a person supports or commits acts of terrorism”).¹⁹ They simply state that they might, as if the individuals concerned are potentially and perpetually predisposed to radicalization. In fact, the predetermining and proscriptive factors in the report are Islam and the Middle East, where Islamic violence is treated as quintessentially different from other forms of violence, be it Christian, Buddhist, nationalist, or secular. In other words, without the Islamic factor, the criterion of radicalization is just a description of what could just as easily be described as “rebellious” or “alternative” teenagers.

¹⁷ Ranstorp and Dos Santos, “Kommuner måste hejda extremism,” 8.

¹⁸ Ranstorp and Dos Santos, “Kommuner måste hejda extremism,” 10–11.

¹⁹ Ranstorp and Dos Santos, “Kommuner måste hejda extremism,” 3.

Open Source Jihad

Now, as will become clear in this Element, the conclusions drawn by authors of the Rosengård Report fit very well into mainstream explicatory models of terrorism where the religion (Islam), culture (medieval), and social alienation (chosen) are taken as root causes for radicalization.²⁰ The problem I want to highlight here, however, is less about the assumptions made about Islamic radicalization within mainstream terrorism studies than that these assumptions are given as evidence without any empirical evidence.

I am not the first to highlight these aspects of the Rosengård Report. After its publication, it was widely criticized by leading scholars on Islam in Sweden for being empirically vague and ethnocentric. When these critical voices demanded access to the empirical material, it transpired that it had, in supposedly good academic tradition, been destroyed.²¹ Moreover, the head of the Swedish Security Service (*Säkerhetspolisen*) responded by stating that the threat against Sweden and Swedish interests at the time was “very low” and that the negative image of Rosengård is simply wrong: “It’s probably due to a misrepresentation by the news media. Rosengård works really well.”²² Even though the report’s academic, empirical, and methodological quality has been questioned by nonnegligible parts of the Swedish research community, the report is still treated as the truth. When one of the authors rebutted the critique, he stated that the important thing was to

²⁰ See Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(4) (2010), 479–494; Floris Vermeulen, “Suspect Communities – Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(2) (2014), 286–306.

²¹ TT, “Källmaterialet är förstört,” Svenska dagbladet, January 30, 2009, accessed January 15, 2016, <https://www.svd.se/kallmaterial-ar-forstort>.

²² Kenan Habul, “Säpochefen säger Rosengårdsrapport,” *Sydvenskan*, June 13, 2009, accessed January 15, 2016, www.sydsvenskan.se/sverige/sapochefen-sagar-rosengardsrapport/.

Elements in Religion and Violence

not let any potential shortcomings in quality lead to a loss of focus on the matter, namely radicalization in Rosengård.²³

The Discourse on Islamic Terrorism

The Rosengård Report is but one example of the many ways in which what will henceforth be referred to as the “discourse on Islamic terrorism” has been reproduced. It is a discourse that, as noted by Peter Jackson, is made out of specific types of categories: “‘the Islamic world’, ‘the West’, ‘the Islamic revival’, ‘political Islam’, ‘Islamism’, ‘extremism’, ‘radicalism’, ‘fundamentalism’, ‘religious terrorism’, ‘jihadists’, ‘Wahhabis’, ‘Salafis’, ‘militants’, ‘moderates’, ‘global jihadist movement’, ‘al-Qaeda’, and finally, ‘Islamic terrorism.’”²⁴ These categories are, as Jackson notes, “often vaguely defined (if at all), yet culturally loaded and highly flexible in the way they are deployed.”²⁵

The discourse has now, through its omnipresence in the news media, popular culture, and political speech, become so normalized that it has developed into a language that is on virtually everybody’s tongue.²⁶ As Joseba Zulaika points out, the central mantra of this language is the following: “It is not *if*, but *when*.”²⁷ This is what makes these attacks resonate so widely throughout Western Europe, and be experienced as happenings next door in

²³ Magnus Ranstorp, “Diskutera sakfrågan om Rosengård istället,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 14, 2009, accessed January 12, 2016, www.svd.se/diskutera-sakfragan-om-rosengard-istallet.

²⁴ Peter Jackson, “Constructing Enemies: ‘Islamic terrorism’ in academic and political discourse,” *Government and Opposition* 42(3) (2007), 401.

²⁵ Jackson, “Constructing,” 7.

²⁶ Joshua Woods, “Framing Terror: An experimental framing effects study of the perceived threat of terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4(2) (2011), 199–217.

²⁷ Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 158.

Open Source Jihad

a small city such as Norrtälje, north of Stockholm, or in a country such as Latvia, with an estimated population of about 2,000 Muslims. It is moreover structured on binary pairs that draw on Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Imperialism, and state centrism – that is, good/evil, Christianity/Islam, secularism/religion, civilization/barbarity, democracy/terrorism, masculine/feminine, peace/war, just war/unjust war, deradicalization/radicalization, the West/the Orient, and we/them.²⁸

These categories, moreover, are part of articulating different types of subjects that are tied to temporality, spatiality, and ontology and displace these subjects from the here and now²⁹: temporality in terms of the pre-modernity associated with these subjects but also in terms of their potential for future action,³⁰ spatially in the locating of them either in the imagined Orient and its border areas within the European nation-state – the suburb. As for the ontology of who “we” the Europeans are and who “they” the radicalized or potentially radicalized Muslims are, as the report so painstakingly testifies, there is, in this logic, no need to talk with “them,” since we already know who “they” *really* are.³¹ This is a foreclosed logic where the Muslim youth *tout court* is seen as prone to radicalization.³² A suspected community of Muslim youth is created and portrayed to be in perpetual need of surveillance and discipline for “our”

²⁸ See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: Us and them beyond Orientalism* (London: Hurst, 2011); Helen Dexter, “Terrorism and Violence: Another violence is possible?” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(1) (2012), 121–137.

²⁹ See Jane Samson, *Race and Empire* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).

³⁰ Zulaika, *Terrorism*.

³¹ Per-Erik Nilsson, “Who Is Madame M? Staking Out the Borders for Secular France,” in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, eds. Trevor Stack, Timothy Fitzgerald, and Naomi Goldenberg (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 21–37.

³² Kundnani, “The Muslims Are Coming.”

well-being.³³ This logic calls for and legitimizes a preemptive logic of deradicalization explicitly targeting young Muslims. For this community not to be classified as prone to radicalization and violent extremism, it has to abandon its Islamic identity altogether, as all “not-in-my-name” campaigns bear witness to.³⁴ The uncanny paradox here is that it is only as Muslims that they can distance themselves from Islam. The community is doomed to eternal stigmatization or mimicry.³⁵ That the major attacks carried out in Western Europe post-9/11 (i.e., Madrid, London, Paris, Brussels) have been caused by what in the mainstream research literature on terrorism are referred to as “home-grown” terrorists has brought oil to the fire.³⁶ The threat of Islamic violence is everywhere and the enemy is among “us.”³⁷

As is well known, when white ultra-nationalists and fascists commit what are usually labeled terrorist acts when committed by Muslim citizens, their identity is never reduced to Scandinavian-ness, British-ness, or French-ness. They are never portrayed as radical or fundamentalist interpreters of nationalism as jihadi militants are portrayed as the twisted interpreters of Islam. Regardless of what history withholds, they are commonly pathologized as

³³ See Stuart Croft, *Securitising Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); June Edmunds, “The ‘New’ Barbarians: Governmentality, securitization and Islam in Western Europe,” *Contemporary Islam* 6(1) (2012), 67–84; Luca Mavelli, “Between Normalisation and Exception: The securitisation of Islam and the construction of the secular subject,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41(2), 2013, 159–181.

³⁴ Per-Erik Nilsson, “Where’s Charlie,,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*, ed. James R. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁶ Lorne L. Dawson, “The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a dialogue,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (1) (2009), 1–21.

³⁷ Liz Fekete and Frances Webber, “Foreign Nationals, Enemy Penology and the Criminal Justice System,” *Race & Class* 51(4) (2010), 1–25.