

Contributions to Security and Defence Studies

Katarzyna Maniszewska

# Towards a New Definition of Terrorism

Challenges and Perspectives  
in a Shifting Paradigm

 Springer

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## Preface

In 2012, I had the privilege of meeting Zbigniew Brzeziński (1928–2017), a Polish-American diplomat, political scientist, and advisor on security to US Presidents. Mr. Brzeziński served at the time as a Member of the Board of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, where I have just taken up a position.

A colleague who introduced me to Mr. Brzezinski said, “Sir, this is our new colleague Katarzyna Maniszewska; she has just started working with us as an advisor on education. But she did her Ph.D. on terrorism.” Mr. Brzezinski raised his eyebrows. “Terrorism?”—he asked. “Yes, sir!”—I was really nervous talking to one of the best-known experts in geopolitics—“The case study I used was the history of the Red Army Faction in Germany.” Then I started to explain how I think the organization was one of the forerunners of modern terrorism. Mr. Brzezinski listened, and then all of a sudden, he asked—“So, how do you actually define terrorism? Can terrorism be defined at all?” “Yes, sir!”—I said with the confidence characteristic to a lot of young researchers who believe they found the correct answer to all the questions. “Terrorism is the utmost manifestation of political extremism; it has political goals, uses violence, and depends on the mass media to instil fear into the public...”—I started to explain.

He smiled and said, “Well, can you call someone who fights for independence and freedom a terrorist?” I started to argue (again, with this irritating confidence) that it was clear it could be defined, it was challenging, not impossible, and there was a clear difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist.

“Jestem tu nieco adwokatem diabła, widzę jednak, że pani idzie w dobrą stronę” (I am playing a bit of devil’s advocate here, though I see you are on the right track)—Mr. Brzeziński said.

The conversation took less than 15 min, though it gave me a lot of food for thought. So, can terrorism be defined? After almost 20 years in terrorism studies, I am not that sure anymore. Does it mean we should not explore the topic? Are the academic discussions ineffective and, in fact, useless? No—this is perhaps the main conclusion of this book. For the research, I interviewed some of the greatest minds in terrorism studies in the world—experts from different countries and with diverse backgrounds and experiences. And although they disagree in many aspects, one

thought keeps coming back throughout the interviews: the attempts to define terrorism bring us a little closer to understanding this complex and highly politicized phenomenon. And this—as I will try to show in this publication—is vital for counterterrorism efforts.

Warsaw, Poland

Katarzyna Maniszewska

# Acknowledgments

I want to extend words of gratitude to all the experts who devoted their precious time to participating in the interviews. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Bruce Hoffman, who gave an unknown Polish scholar a chance and agreed to be the first respondent. His contribution and academic standing immensely helped secure the interviews with other experts.

I am very grateful to my editor, Niko Chtouris, for all his guidance. I thank the two reviewers (anonymous reviews) for their positive assessment and invaluable remarks that immensely helped finalize the work on the manuscript. I am also grateful to Renee Stillings for language consulting.

I want to thank my home university, Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, the Rector, Prof. Stanisław Mocek, and my Polish colleagues, among them Dr. Paulina Piasecka and Dr. Monika Nowicka, with whom I discussed the research and whose comments and critical approach often served as inspiration. I am grateful to my brother Mateusz Maniszewski, an expert in cybersecurity and risk management, for his insightful feedback.

Finally, I thank my partner Greg for the long discussions about the nature of terrorism, history, and politics, and the everyday support without which I would not have been able to complete the work on this book.



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



**Abstract** The Introduction presents the research objectives, questions, and hypotheses. There are two main hypotheses. First, new legal frameworks for defining terrorism are needed, and second, through the analysis of the history of the development of terrorism, patterns can be found that could help counter terrorism in the future. The author describes the methodology of the research and its timeline, as well as the limitations encountered. The author explains the position of the research within the spectrum of critical and orthodox terrorism studies. The chapter concludes with an overview of the content of the book.

This book presents the outcomes of research aimed at identifying the main challenges in countering terrorism in the context of the shifting paradigm of the phenomenon, with one of the primary research focus on state (sponsored) terrorism.

Is a consensus on a standard definition of terrorism at the international level possible? If so, what are the red lines or boundary conditions for achieving compromise?

On the one hand, there is an abundance of definitions of terrorism, and, on the other—the absence of a standard definition of terrorism that is accepted at the international level. The author's hypothesis 1 is that new legal frameworks are needed, which should reflect the changing paradigm and should not omit state (sponsored) terrorism, which has been the case for decades. The new frameworks are needed to counter terrorist threats effectively at international and national levels. The author's hypothesis 2 is that by analysing the history of the development of terrorism, patterns can be found that could help counter terrorism in the future.

The author aimed at a) interviewing at least 20 of the leading experts in terrorism studies in the world to identify whether the hypotheses can be verified and b) based on the author's research and interviews, elaborate a descriptive matrix that could serve as an aid to the legal framework development and research needed to more effectively address security challenges relating to acts of terrorism.

The author conducted the main part of the research, including research interviews, which are the central part of the book, between September 2022 and May 2023.

The experts are chosen mainly based on their contribution to security studies and academic positions. Further, the author wanted to ensure the representation of experts from different countries and backgrounds. The author invited researchers not holding currently governmental positions for the interviews to avoid bias in the research.

Out of 37 invitations sent, 21 experts initially agreed to participate in the research, and eventually, 20 interviews were conducted. This is the response rate of 54%. In six cases, interviews were conducted via email (questions sent in written form and the answers received in written form), and fifteen interviews were conducted in person and online using the Zoom platform. The transcripts of interviews were made by the author, as were the translations to English (in the case of some interviews with Polish experts). There is a visible underrepresentation of female researchers despite the author's efforts to secure the interviews. This is noted by the author—a female scholar herself—with deep regret and can be a sign that terrorism studies remain a male-dominated field. The author hopes this book can contribute to encouraging female terrorism researchers to make their voices heard.

An additional interview was conducted in February 2023 with Open AI GPT Chat (3.5 version). The author assumed that AI could give answers based on accumulated knowledge without the emotional angle immanent for humans.

This research aims at synthesizing insights from two perspectives—critical terrorism studies and orthodox terrorism studies. Terrorism studies are traditionally divided into orthodox studies (OST) and critical studies (CST). The orthodox school of terrorism research is represented, among other researchers, by Brian M. Jenkins, Walter Laqueur, Audrey C. Cronin, Martha Crenshaw, Bruce Hoffman, Albert J. Jongman, Robert Pape, David. C. Rapoport, Marc Sageman, and Alex P. Schmid. The critical approach to terrorism studies is represented, among others, by Priya Dixit, Conor Gearty, Aleksandra Gasztold, Jeroen Gunning, Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jacob L. Stump.

Richard Jackson notes that CTS are characterized by a set of features that include awareness of the inherent ontological instability of the “terrorism” category.<sup>1</sup> The descriptive matrix proposed in this book may be seen as partly addressing this instability. However, the author finds it challenging to frame the research as part of exclusively orthodox or exclusively critical terrorism studies. The challenge stems from adopting a multidisciplinary perspective to the research, with the intention of bridging the worlds of orthodox terrorism studies and critical terrorism studies.

In addition, the differences in research schools are sometimes referred to in the literature as the “Atlantic divide”, with the majority of orthodox scholars in the US and the majority representing critical approaches in Europe. The author must admit that she finds the division unsuitable for modern times, where the understanding of the need for decolonization of research and academic teaching is becoming

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Jackson, The core commitments of critical terrorism studies, in: *European Political Science*, September 2007, doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210141.

increasingly visible.<sup>2</sup> The “Atlantic divide” perspective may be seen as a reflection of colonial legacies, as it represents the Euro-Atlantic, or Western-centric viewpoint, leaving out of the equation scholars, experts, and thinkers in other parts of the world, which were historically marginalized or colonized. Today, they are, however, often at the forefront of terrorism and countering the threat.

Drawing upon the insights gathered in expert interviews, which include voices from the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond, as well as voices of orthodox terrorism studies scholars and representatives of critical terrorism studies, the theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the belief that terrorism necessitates a holistic examination and inclusion of a variety of perspectives. Thus, this framework aims to synthesise the views to answer the main research question about the feasibility of a potential universally accepted definition of terrorism.

In addition, the author feels that an explanation is needed on the choice of literature reviewed for this book. Several authors cited do not belong to the internationally known (e.g., Scopus-indexed) group of scholars of terrorism studies. They are Polish and they work in the Polish language, which limits the dissemination of the results of their studies. With this book, the author aims to highlight some of this research. The reasons are as follows: Polish researchers, many of them in terrorism research for the past 40+ years, have a unique perspective spanning from the times when Poland was a USSR satellite state to today’s Poland—a NATO member, playing an active role in the global security system, and at the same time being a country where the risk of terrorism has been for many years assessed at the lowest levels by the Global Terrorism Index. Poland, as Ukraine’s neighbour and assuming a crucial role in the military (and humanitarian) assistance to Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, holds a critical position in today’s world’s security architecture. In addition, there are examples of Polish researchers cited in this book who previously served as high-ranking law enforcement or intelligence services officers. They bring not only substantial academic expertise but also experience from the field. Thus, the author deliberately chose to include their thoughts in this book. It has to be noted that Polish research is represented in this publication by a new generation of researchers as well, with examples being Aleksandra Gasztold, the author of innovative works on gender perspectives in terrorism, incl. “Feminist Perspectives on Terrorism. Critical Approaches to Security Studies”<sup>3</sup> and Paulina Piasecka, the director of the Terrorism Research Centre in Warsaw and hybrid conflicts expert.

The book is divided into six main chapters. In the first chapter, “One Man’s Terrorist” the author gives an overview of the attempts to define terrorism in literature and by scholars interviewed. The author presents different approaches to defining terrorism in academia, international institutions, and the legal frameworks of selected countries. One of the research foci is put on the media coverage of

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<sup>2</sup>Only one example: during the annual ASEES conference (The Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies) in 2023 approx. 175 sessions (30% of total) addressed in some way the topic of “decolonization” of research and curricula, <https://www.aseees.org>.

<sup>3</sup>Gasztold, Aleksandra, *Feminist Perspectives on Terrorism. Critical Approaches to Security Studies*, Cham, 2020.

terrorism, the psychological effects on societies and the role of the journalists and legally operating content creators in broad counterterrorism efforts.

In the second chapter, “Shifting Paradigm of Terrorism,” the author focuses on the development stages of terrorism and looks for historical parallels between the modus operandi of currently operating terrorists and examples from the history of terrorism in the twentieth century. The case study used is the Red Army Faction, a German leftist organisation whose history the author thoroughly researched for her previous books. Further, the author attempts to show similarities between state support for terrorist organisations. Here, the Soviet Union and the contemporary Russian Federation serve as case studies.

The next chapter, “Countering Terrorism: Key Challenges and Proposed Solutions” focuses on the analysis of the key factors named by the experts interviewed as obstacles in effectively addressing the issue of terrorism, both nationally and at the international level. The author adds to the factors named by the experts additional challenges, such as the crime-terrorism nexus. Further, an analysis of the potential trade-offs in developing a joint, universally accepted definition of terrorism is performed based on the 5-step analysis proposed by B. Scheiner.

In the chapter “Descriptive Matrix Proposal”, the author presents an idea for a new approach to definitional challenges relating to terrorism—the draft matrix. The block matrix, which is flexible in form, could potentially be used to address the nature of specific terrorist organisations, lone actors in terrorism, and terrorist attacks. The draft matrix includes five categories, sine qua non conditions without which an act, organisation, or solo actor cannot be classified as terrorism/terrorist. Further, the draft matrix proposes a set of descriptors. The author repeatedly emphasizes in this chapter that the final project of the matrix (provided the idea would find supporters in academia) should be elaborated in a broad consensus and include various perspectives. It also requires enhanced international collaboration. In the chapter, the matrix is tested on examples, including the Wagner Group.

The chapter “Perspectives on terrorism. Expert interviews” features interviews conducted by the author with scholars in security studies, terrorism studies, and international relations. This chapter includes interviews with the following experts (in alphabetical order): Tomasz Aleksandrowicz, Eitan Azani, Seun Bamidele, Daniel Boćkowski, Robert Borkowski, Dino Patti Djalal, Inas Pratiwi Fadila, Aleksandra Gasztold, Conor Gearty, Bruce Hoffman, Kuba Jałoszyński, Marek Jeznach, Gilles Kepel, Barnett Koven, Emeka T. Njoku, Paulina Piasecka, Olivier Roy, Damian Szlachter, Alex P. Schmid, Lorenzo Vidino. The chapter concludes with the transcript of an interview conducted with Chat GPT. The interviews reflect the extent to which the experts’ opinions differ. They may serve as proof that in terrorism research, a collaborative approach, analysis and synthesis of various expert opinions, and the need for a compromise are necessary.

The book ends with “Conclusions”, where the author verifies the research hypothesis and again emphasizes the need for international cooperation. As Alex P. Schmid reminded during the interview, “a problem well defined is a problem half-solved”—this saying should perhaps be the motto on the way forward in finding a new definition of terrorism.

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## Chapter 2

# One Man's Terrorist



**Abstract** In this chapter a review of definitional problems relating to the term terrorism is presented, including its ‘relativity’. The definitions discussed include those present in academia as well as in legal systems. The author attempts to find similarities in the definitions to identify the common denominators. Further, the relationship between the media and terrorism is presented to highlight the dependence of terrorism on the means of mass communication in order to achieve one of their main goals’—instill fear into the public. In this context the issues of code of ethics in the media are being raised, examples discussed include BBC, UNESCO Handbook for journalists and the Council of Europe recommendation “Media and Terrorism”.

In October 2021 during the meeting of the Sixth Committee of the United Nations,<sup>1</sup> delegates argued on how to develop a global response to terrorism, including identifying terrorist actions sponsored by states. The debate shows, in a nutshell, the challenges to defining terrorism at the global level.

During the debate, the U.S. named as terrorist Iran and its proxy partner Hezbollah. Additionally, China was accused of misusing ‘counterterrorism’ to oppress the Uyghurs, which was then called “baseless allegations” by the representative of China. The representative of Venezuela accused the Western countries and allies of pushing the neocolonialism agenda via terrorism, calling D.C. and Bogota “the industry of death,” which was then supported by Syria, stating that terrorism was used as an excuse to implement political and economic agendas by some states. Pakistan accused India of supporting terrorism, and India accused Pakistan of the same. Representatives of El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Mexico noted the nexus between terrorism and organized crime. Mexico expressed concern about

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<sup>1</sup>Sixth Committee is the primary forum for the consideration of legal questions in the General Assembly. All of the United Nations Member States are entitled to representation on the Sixth Committee as one of the main committees of the General Assembly, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth> [accessed: 20 February 2023]