

# Field research and a sharper focus on the young could help combat terrorism: Science Policy Forum paper

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Field research, especially on the ground with youths engaged in violent extremism or susceptible to it, is needed to inform machine learning in mining vast amounts of field data that could improve an understanding of the terrorist threat of groups, such as Islamic State and Al Qaeda, suggests a new research paper published in *Science*. It argues that the US government's national security systems have not adapted sufficiently to the threats posed by groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, saying they continue to be structured around state to state interactions more suited to the Cold War. It adds they are too focused on criminal procedures of limited effectiveness against mass movements, and military policy based on cost-benefit analyses that fail to address the importance of commitment to beliefs and values, as with many suicide bombers. The paper says such terrorist groups present threats that are both transnational and home-grown, suggesting that future research aimed at preventing the radicalisation of youth needs to focus more on their 'hopes and dreams', and policies that view the young as a solution rather than as a problem.

The paper is led by Scott Atran, a Research Associate at the University of Oxford in the UK, with colleagues from Artis International, the University of Michigan and Carnegie Mellon University in the United States. The US government has relied, almost exclusively, on its intelligence services that monitor individuals and groups that threaten [national security](#) and specialise in clandestine gathering and analysing, it

suggests. Yet, such information has not necessarily been scientifically tested or systematically cross-examined for accuracy and completeness, suggests the paper. It adds, there is little [research](#) that approaches statistical or clinical reliability for generalizations about terrorism or terrorists.

While US government policy focuses on counter narratives as an alternative to the terrorist ideology, the authors argue this strategy does not focus enough on where, when and how ideas and values acquire their effectiveness, or the concrete basis for their very existence in the social networks and neighbourhoods where terrorism thrives. They say research and policy needs to examine the factors that bind people together: the passion and purpose of groups such as Isis and Al Qaeda. The paper remarks that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria alone has managed to recruit from 100 countries, and some of this success can be attributed, in part, to its members learning the nuances of words and social connections needed to enlist followers.

Research and funding to understand terrorism needs to extend beyond the 'sporadic involvement' of researchers from the top universities to become a coordinated multinational, interdisciplinary effort, says the paper. Field interviews with militants, country surveys and psychological experiments have to be more joined up, and big data analyses will need to be informed by theory and field experience to pinpoint connections that are truly significant and meaningful, says the paper.

The independence of the scientists involved is paramount, argues the paper. 'Unless government maintains proper distance, it will deter scientists ready to build knowledge to contain terrorism but who fear wasting time or compromising their integrity,' it concludes.

Another problem highlighted is a lack of proper US funding for research into disciplines that could be harnessed to bring together diverse data and

develop algorithms for big data-driven work. The US Department of Defense has provided no more than 2% of its annual \$5-6 billion budget for science and engineering research, and just 6% of \$16 billion for basic research for psychology and social sciences research in 2016, says the paper. Although the White House set up a federal programme for countering [violent extremism](#) in 2015, this unit 'currently lacks the mechanisms and funding', says the paper. It highlights a need for theoretical and field knowledge to create 'culturally sensitive' training data; and researchers have to be alert to any changes in terrorists' behaviour that could undermine archived observations.

Professor Atran comments: 'To be more successful in combating terrorism, governments should look at how they can build research capacity that is properly funded, independent of governmental interference, and grounded in systematic data collection, checking and analyses that is devoid of politics.'

The paper notes that previous research has suggested that nearly three-quarters of those who join Islamic State or Al Qaeda do so in groups, and these are often pre-existing social networks and typically cluster in particular towns and neighbourhoods. Although recruitment to ISIS occurs more to direct personal appeals by organisational agents or individual exposure to social media, than previously was the case with Al Qaeda, this clustered rather than dispersed pattern of recruitment through pre-existing social networks suggests that counter-radicalisation and prevention policies need to focus less on individual personalities and more on whole group dynamics.

'There is also a need to improve our understanding of how young people become radicalised and what we can do to prevent it. Theories about "root causes" have concentrated on factors such as an individual's social and economic circumstances, and these are not nuanced enough. Recent research has shown [social networking](#) is important for the growth in size

and scope of [terrorist groups](#). Epidemiological models that have more commonly been used in public health studies could be deployed - of how radical ideas move through host populations—rather than relying on a strictly criminal approach to look at violent extremism.'

**More information:** "Challenges in researching terrorism from the field," *Science*, [science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi ... 1126/science.aaj2037](https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aaj2037)

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