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Strategic Blowback and the Crisis of Counterterrorism Narratives: Reassessing the Future of Terrorism as a United States National Security Threat

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Strategic Blowback and the Crisis of Counterterrorism Narratives: Reassessing the Future of Terrorism as a United States National Security Threat

Abstract

Twenty years on from September 11, the United States has yet to develop a consensus over what constitutes terrorism, or authority to define it. The article contends that the post-9/11 wars will have a strategic backlash effect on American security from the outside, while partisan polarization, online radicalization, and migration adaptation issues will have a fracturing effect on American security from the inside. It invites a convergence model based on the databases of terrorism, the cost of war assessment, federal threat reports and theoretical literature, and considers these using the context of the political crisis in Bangladesh in 2024–2026 and the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016. It calls for a change in the moral and epistemological basis of counterterrorism, not just repression.

Keywords: *terrorism, strategic blowback, radicalization, counterterrorism narrative, homeland security, migration and security*

1. Introduction

Terrorism is likely to be one of the most significant and misunderstood threats to US national security over the next twenty years. Further, research conducted by the Government Accountability Office affirms the fact that terrorism investigations carried out by the FBI doubled from 2020 to 2023, but the federal authorities are still far from establishing a national strategy aimed at eliminating the threat.

This article claims that the potential for terrorism threat to the United States in the future cannot be perceived just as the repetition of the events after September 11, 2001. The second is a strategic process of domestic ideological, social, and political fragmentation that gives rise to new forms of extremism in the United States such as far-right ethno-nationalist violence and new forms of radicalism that rely on internet and modern technology (Sageman 2008). The most important argument made in this context is that it is not either process on its own that makes any threat to the national security, but the combination of these processes.

The concept of the dilemma pertaining to terrorism narratives is linked to both of the paths discussed in the article. This problem turns out to have a real-world impact due to the fact that any policy linking terrorism and morality should be accepted by those populations the policy

is supposed to protect from it, otherwise, the conflict will continue taking place, generating new waves of violence.

The article examines three questions: how the human, fiscal, and moral costs of post-9/11 wars generated strategic blowback; how state fragility, migration, integration, and radicalization relate to political fragmentation in the United States; and what a counterterrorism narrative should contain to reduce long-term risks.

The article has been written in accordance to the IMRD structure. The fourth section of the document deals with the results, which include costs of GWOT, developments of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, case of Bangladesh, resettlement and displacement, profiles of radicalization, domestic extremism and its foreign amplification, and data of Global Terrorism Index. Section five summarizes the information, suggests the convergence model, presents policies and limitations, and concludes the document.

New evidence suggests other social, economic, and psychological elements that facilitate violent extremism. The use of modeling research to counter terrorism also proves the value of taking into account several interrelated variables in predicting the probability of extremism, rather than the concept of terrorism as a result of one determinant (Mohammad et al. 2025). The research on counteracting expressions of violence also involved the concepts of masculinity, together with an evaluation of social settings in which people can reasonably undergo radicalization or deradicalization, which brings us to the conclusion that it is more reasonable to approach issues of prevention basing on the idea of personality and social environments (Stahl, Adams, and Oberg 2024). These studies are in line with the overall ideas of the article, i.e. it is impossible to create one definition or account for one demographic category of radicalization today, as there are simply too many issues connected with financial, psychological, social being involved in the process of radicalization these days.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we consider six lines of scholarly work that combine to give shape to the analysis. These lines are: the confusing definition of terrorism and the narrative of post-9/11 era; blowback theory; the theory of regime change and state failure; migration and the experience of war; process theories of radicalization; and internal extremism and the concept of external influence.

2.1 Defining Terrorism: Definitional Crisis and the Post-9/11 Discourse

For over four decades, scholarly efforts to define terrorism have not yielded an agreement on a single definition of the term. In Alex Schmid's 2011 survey of the academic and legal definitions of terrorism, he analyzed over a hundred definitions. Bruce Hoffman in his work published in 2006 traces the history of the term and describes how over the course of two hundred years it has transformed into its modern meaning which is dominated by politically motivated actions of non-state actors.

The post-9/11 American counterterrorism rhetoric did not clarify this ambiguity, but instead institutionalized one side of it. The appearance of Critical Terrorism Studies as a distinct academic field was itself an academic response to the problem in question, stating that mainstream terrorism studies have closely associated themselves with security issues to be able to question its original principles (Guaire 2024; Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009). When the September 11 events are considered as a benchmark for terrorism in one part of the world while the destruction of Fallujah, bombing of Mosul, and civilian deaths in Gaza and Afghanistan serve for that purpose in another, the two groups in contumacy are not anymore discussing the tactics but embark on a totally different attribution of values.

In this epistemological clash, religion played a role as a catalyst rather than a culprit. Similarly, Gilles Kepel says in his book “A War for Muslim Minds” that the post-9/11 context has helped unleash radical forms of political Islam just because military presence created an impression of legitimacy for their apocalyptic view of the world. Following research done in the field of religion and political violence has been more careful with respect to always being mono-causal, saying that the radicalization process represents only a piece of the larger structure of political, economic, and psychological grievances (Kunst and Obaidi 2020; Neumann 2013) and that the process of "religionization" after the event of 9/11 was just a follow-up.

The result recorded in the Critical Terrorism Studies literature and repeated in mainstream scholarship on GWOT ethics is a discourse that succeeded in using American institutions and military forces while failing to attain that "absolute validity" that its authors claim it has (Guaire 2024; Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009). What began as a concept aimed at delegitimizing violence has ended up producing a parallel and counter-legitimization of violence in many parts of the world (American Academy of Arts and Sciences n.d.).

2.2 Blowback and the Strategic Consequences of Intervention

The term "blowback" was introduced by Chalmers Johnson (2007) to refer to the unintended delayed outcomes of American interventions either clandestinely or openly. The comprehensive research of suicide terrorism conducted by Robert Pape showed that most of the suicidal attacks that happened between 1980 and 2003 were primarily linked not to religious ideology, but rather to foreign occupation (Ashworth et al. 2008; Collard-Wexler, Pischedda, and Smith 2014).

2.3 Regime Change, Democratization Failures, and Fragile-State Extremism

A second adaptation method of the post-9/11 security protocol is the aspect of regime change politics. The same pattern is observed in all post-9/11 intervening cases: external agents aim to achieve instant political transformation and establish links with local partners, informers, and other factions who act either out of sincere belief in democracy or as opportunists.

The aftermath, which has been observed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, indicates that rather than creating strong democracies, there is a repetition of poor governance, fighting between factions, and emergence of militias (Connah 2021; Paris 2004). When the government fails, the resulting "ungoverned space" becomes a target for local terrorist groups as well as international ones looking for a safe environment in which to function.

2.4 Migration, War Trauma, and the Question of Integration

According to the established consensus in migration-security literature, it is crucial to clarify that there is no evidence indicating a causal relationship between the refugee or immigrant status of a person and the risk of terrorism. Most of the persons fleeing from war zones are looking for security and order in life, so assuming that displacement is a security threat is both baseless empirically and morally wrong (Bigo and Guild 2019).

What the literature reveals is a narrower risk pathway: the intersection of trauma, perceived injustice, failure of integration and either online or offline exposure to radicalization. The meta-analysis published in the Journal of Social Issues (Pfundmair et al. 2022) confirmed the hypothesis that social exclusion is a robust predictor of violence justification irrespective of any religious or ideological views via the mechanisms of identity threat and belonging. There is also a specific chapter of The Cambridge Handbook on the Economics of Terrorism that says that measurable terrorism risk does not stem from migration flows but from particular

identifiable groups that have been exposed to trauma and have failed to integrate successfully (Krieger 2026; Rubin 2021).

2.5 Radicalization: Process Models, Risk Factors, and Emerging Organizational Forms

The new trend within the modern research on radicalism is a clear move away from a monocausal or profile-oriented explanation to the application of models of staged, multi-factor processes (Doosje et al. 2016; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Neumann 2013). The model developed by Fathali Moghaddam under the name "staircase to terrorism" offers an explanation of radicalization as a narrowing psychological tube where the dynamics of perceived injustice, blocked opportunities for social advancement, and misdirected aggression gradually eliminate the alternatives to violence for a group of persons who reach the last floor of the tube (Doosje et al. 2016). The research showed that generally most people who share radical opinions do not commit violence (McCauley 2020). Figure 1 illustrates this distinction through McCauley and Moskalenko's (2017) two-pyramids model, which separates an opinion pyramid (from neutral bystanders to those who feel a personal moral duty to act) from an action pyramid (from the inert to terrorists), showing that radical beliefs and radical behavior are distinct and that far fewer people ascend the action pyramid than the opinion pyramid.

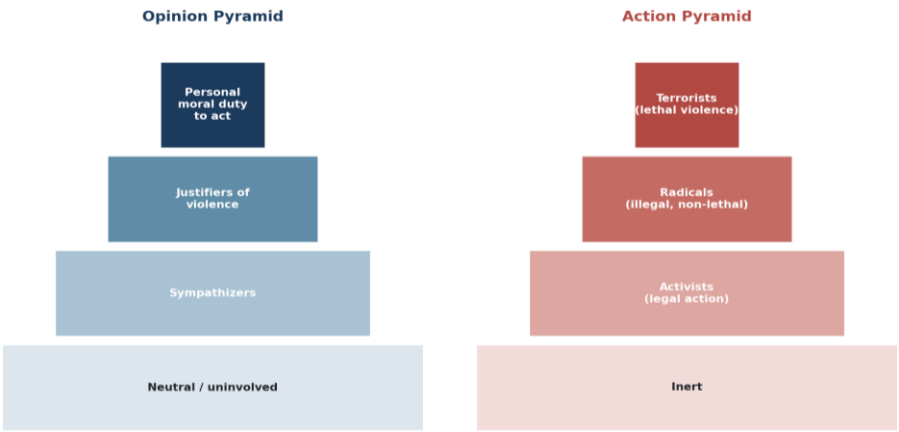


Figure 1. The Two-Pyramids Model of Political Radicalization *Source: McCauley and Moskalenko (2017)*

Arie Kruglanski's "significance quest" theory adds another psychological component in that it posits that radicalization is often the by-product of the quest for personal significance following humiliating, losing, or marginalizing experiences, something offered by extremist ideologies and networks through a clear-cut way towards gaining status and meaning (Doosje et al. 2016; as also pointed out by Bösing et al. 2024). Indeed, according to Marc Sageman's (2008)

network analysis, many post-9/11 jihadists were well-educated, technically savvy, and well-integrated into society prior to becoming radicalized, contradicting older assumptions that terrorism is primarily related to poverty and lack of education (Kruglanski et al. 2014).

Table 1 highlights the major risk and resilience factors that have been identified in this literature (Borum 2011; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Pfundmair et al. 2022; Rousseau et al. 2025; Silke 2008).

Table 1. A Risk-Factor Framework for Radicalization: Push, Pull, and Protective Factors

Factor Type	Illustrative Drivers
Psychological push factors	Perceived injustice; humiliation; loss of personal significance; unresolved war trauma
Social / structural push factors	Social exclusion; discrimination; failed integration; blocked economic mobility
Ideological / network pull factors	Charismatic recruiters; online extremist ecosystems; narratives of belonging and purpose
Structural opportunity / pull factors	Weak state governance; ungoverned space; foreign-state amplification of grievance
Protective / resilience factors	Strong community ties; trauma-informed mental health support; civic inclusion; credible counternarratives

Source: Compiled by the author from Moghaddam (2005); McCauley and Moskalenko (2008, 2017); Borum (2011); Neumann (2013); Kruglanski et al. (2014); Hafez and Mullins (2015); Doosje et al. (2016); National Institute of Justice (2022); Pfundmair (2024); and RAND Corporation (n.d.).

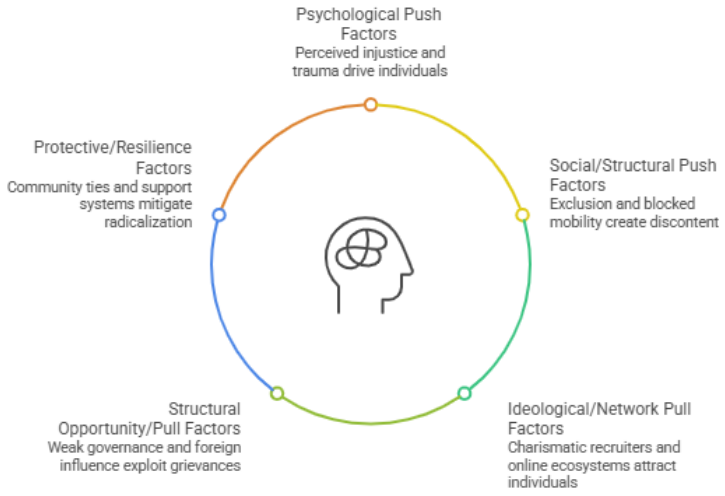


Figure 2. Cycle of Radicalization Factors *Source: Borum (2011); Hafez and Mullins (2015); McCauley and Moskalenko (2017); Pfundmair (2024).*

In Figure 2, radicalization is depicted as a cycle involving psychological grievances, social exclusion, ideological recruitment, and structural opportunity. The cycle can be disrupted by protective community ties. This model denounces deterministic profiling by showing how violent mobilization occurs through an interaction of vulnerabilities, social networks, opportunities, and resilience factors.

In Marc Sageman's (2008) subsequent writings, he predicts the organizational nature of this kind of threat: instead of hierarchical structures affected by leadership exits, the new type of radicals performs as dispersed self-organized networks and individuals radicalized mostly via the Internet, which does not mean their traditional affiliation but makes it harder for counter-terrorist measures to detect. Thomas Zeitzoff's (2017) study proves the same by showing the role of social media in bringing the time between the exposure of an individual to radical information and the action through the elimination of geographical and organizational barriers (Sageman 2004).

2.6 Domestic Extremism and Foreign Amplification

A collection of studies illustrates how domestic extremism has evolved in the U.S. The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Anti-Defamation League have recorded instances of right-wing extremist violence, while START's Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database gives data about the causes of radicalization at an individual level. Research in the area of co-radicalization points out that Islamophobia and Islamist extremism can provoke each other (Öztürk and Pickel 2024). Surveys of political polarization offer the broader social context for the study (Jones 2018; START 2023; Pew Research Center 2024; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs 2024).

Literature about external blowback and internal fragmentation is generally discussed in isolation. The present work aims to change this, suggesting that these terms are not separate analytical constructs but rather two interrelated stories, and at the same time looking at definitions and ethical aspects of counterterrorism.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper does not make use of primary data and is more conceptual and policy analytic in nature. The paper brings together three types of evidence which includes: quantitative datasets collected by established research consortia such as the Global Terrorism Database that has the

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the US dataset, Global Terrorism Index, and Costs of War Project; the theoretical and empirical literature related to blowback, regime change migration, and radicalization; and at least one qualitative field observation based on the author's personal experience of interrogation related to counter-extremism in 2017 as an illustration and not for generalization purposes. This mixed approach is consistent with the tradition in security studies that relies on combining structured data with a theoretical framework for the analysis of case studies.

The analysis defines two interacting pathways. External strategic blowback is assessed through the human, economic, and displacement costs of post-9/11 wars, the rise of ISIS, and developments in states experiencing weak transitions. Internal disintegration is examined through political polarization, online radicalization, domestic terrorism, and integration challenges affecting war-displaced migrants. The analysis then considers how these pathways interact.

3.2 Data Sources

Quantitative data is derived from databases and publications kept by renowned research institutions: the Global Terrorism Database, the PIRUS Database, the Global Terrorism Index 2025, and the Costs of War Project. The tables and illustrations provided in sections 2 and 4 are derived from these sources as reflected in their captions (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2025b; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2024; Government Accountability Office 2024, 2025b; Migration Policy Institute 2022).

3.3 Case Selection

Bangladesh is considered as an example of a case that highlights the mechanism of political transitions occurring without the requirement of direct U.S.-led regime change intervention. Another example of the case would be the attack that took place in Dhaka in 2016 at the Holey Artisan Bakery, providing several details regarding the socio-economic profiles of those involved based on the reports and articles written specifically about the attack.

3.4 Practitioner Vignette

The author's first-hand observations from interviewing counter-extremists in 2017 are documented in a single qualitative field observation. In this instance, the observation is not meant to serve as a form of empirical validation or as a method of obtaining generalizable

evidence, and it is presented in accordance with the relevant psychological research findings discussed in Section 2.5.

3.5 Limitations of the Design

The design has three limitations. First, this conceptual and policy-analytical synthesis identifies plausible interacting pathways but does not statistically test causation. Second, it relies on secondary data whose coverage and definitions vary, compounded by the absence of a universally agreed definition of terrorism. Third, the Bangladesh case and practitioner vignette illustrate mechanisms but cannot establish their frequency or generalizability.

4. Results

This part of the paper is concerned with information provided in seven parts and includes: Cost of post-911 wars (4.1), rise of ISIS (4.2), situation in Bangladesh (4.3), problem of displacement and resettlement (4.4), practical examples of radicalization (4.5), domestic extremism and international spread (4.6), and difference between world terrorism trends and Western terrorism trends (4.7).

4.1 Human and Financial Costs of the Global War on Terror

The dimensions of wars that have followed 9/11 contribute to the phenomenon of blowback dynamics. The project on war expenses carried out by Brown University's Watson Institute believes the military campaigns launched in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Pakistan resulted in between 897,000 and 929,000 casualties and an expense of about $8 trillion incurred by the United States between 2001 and 2021. The table 2 illustrates the regional spread of these conflicts (Costs of War Project 2020, 2021).

Table 2. Human and Financial Costs of the U.S. post-9/11 "War on Terror," 2001–2021

Indicator	**Value**
Direct deaths, all theaters (2001–2021)	897,000-929,000
People displaced by post-9/11 wars	≥38,000,000
Total direct war-fighting cost (2001–2021)	≈ $8.0 trillion
— Afghanistan / Pakistan theater	$2.3 trillion
— Iraq / Syria theater	$2.1 trillion
— Other theaters (Horn of Africa, Sahel, etc.)	$355+ billion
Committed future veteran care costs	$2.2 trillion
Separate counterterrorism spending (non-war), since 2001	≥ $2.8 trillion
Countries in which GWOT operations occurred	80+

Sources: (Costs of War Project 2020, 2021; Center for Public Integrity 2021)

These statistics exceed their humanitarian application; they serve as important parameters of strategy. The Global War on Terror was conducted, as the Costs of War Project states, in more than 80 countries and the total expenditure of the federal government on counterterrorism activities, excluding military expenses, has been independently assessed at $2.8 trillion since 2001, besides hundreds of billions directed at national security needs (Center for Public Integrity 2021; National Priorities Project 2011).

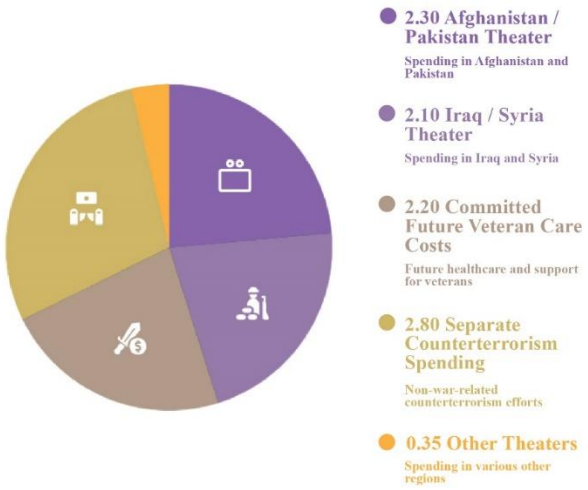


Figure 3. Distribution of U.S. post-9/11 War Spending (2001-2021) ($ trillion) *Source: Costs of War Project (2021); Center for Public Integrity (2021).*

The breakdown shown in figure 3 reveals around $9.75 trillion spent on projects related to post 9/11, dealing with the key theaters of war, medical care for future veterans, counterterrorism initiatives, etc. The numbers prove that money of the United States is spent not only in war but also has long-term consequences and demonstrates the size of the counterterrorism efforts carried out by the United States.

4.2 The Rise of ISIS as a Blowback Outcome

The emergence of the blowback paradox can be best explained by the rise of the Islamic State. Instead of being destroyed by the counterterrorism efforts made after September 11, 2001, the jihadist group managed to establish its most elaborate presence between 2012 and 2014, when it controlled about a third of the territory of Iraq and Syria, managed thousands of people, and established a hybrid combat and administration system capable of collecting taxes and offering

services and propaganda (Byman 2016). The fact that a group such as that could appear as a result of more than ten years of Western measures aimed at fighting terrorism in that region is one of the main empirical mysteries any counterterrorism theory should consider.

4.3 Fragile-State Extremism: The Bangladesh Case

The political course of Bangladesh after August 2024 is a living example of this process, different from American regime change but still illustrative of the same mechanism at work: that of the susceptibility of a weakly transitioned state to the activities of extremists. This case study, however, is being used simply to illustrate the underlying mechanism.

The 2024 political transition in Bangladesh illustrates how the collapse of a stable government can create a security vacuum exploited by previously suppressed militant networks. Following Sheikh Hasina's departure on 5 August 2024, reports documented the resurgence of Islamist organisations, sectarian violence, attacks on religious and gender minorities, prison escapes, and missing weapons. Bangladeshi prison services reported 2,240 prisoner escapes; RSIS separately reported 98 militants escaping custody and 43 prominent militants being released on bail. By December 2024, up to 700 escapees remained at large, while 174 militants had reportedly been released on bail (Asia Society Policy Institute 2024; Bashar 2025a, 2025b).



Figure 4. Bangladesh's Political Transition and Security Vacuum *Source: Asia Society Policy Institute (2024), Bashar (2025a, 2025b), and possibly Business Standard (2025), Jamestown Foundation (2025), Reuters (2025), and Diplomat (2025).*

Figure 4 is the chronology of how the sudden political transition in Bangladesh in August 2024 led to a security vacuum that grew through successive steps. The breakdown of governance was accompanied by the rise of Islamists politically, sectarian violence, release of militants from custody, escapes from jail, and lost firearms.

Scholarly research into the crisis focuses on the interplay between weakened democracy, political competition involving Islamization, and power politics in determining the new post-Hasina order (Behera 2025). The militant religious movement, Hefazat-e-Islam, has also taken up an active political role in the post-revolution era, assembling masses of supporters during a May 2025 rally in Dhaka on the basis of a twelve-point program demanding abolition of Women's Affairs Reform Commission of government and prosecution of former ruling party as a terrorist organization. Another example of the security vacuum left after the revolution being conducive to actors that were once suppressed is the “March for Khilafat” on March 7, 2025, organized by Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB), an organization that is listed as a terrorist organization under the Anti-Terrorism Act of the country since October 2009 but had been operating clandestinely in the intervening fifteen years. This is precisely what happens in the numerous other transitions where the US and its allies had a direct hand, from Libya post-2011 onwards all the way back to Iraq post-2003, and why state-fragility experts view the subsequent disintegration of the security sector as an expected consequence of a sudden transition (Paris 2004).

4.4 Displacement and Resettlement

The movement of people caused by the wars launched after 9/11 was not limited to the conflict areas alone. By the early 2010s, the United States had become the country processing the largest share of Iraqi refugees in the world, a reflection of the legacy of the involvement of the US in the region since 2003. These are not random migrations; these are structural outcomes of the decision-making process discussed in Section 4.1; hence, migration and blowback need to be analyzed in connection with each other and not separately (Center for American Progress 2013; Migration Policy Institute 2022; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services n.d.). Figure 5 traces this sequence, from the start of the post-9/11 wars in 2001 and American involvement in Iraq in 2003, through the 2010s, when the United States became a destination for Iraqi refugees, to the Afghan withdrawal and record Afghan migration to the United States in 2021.

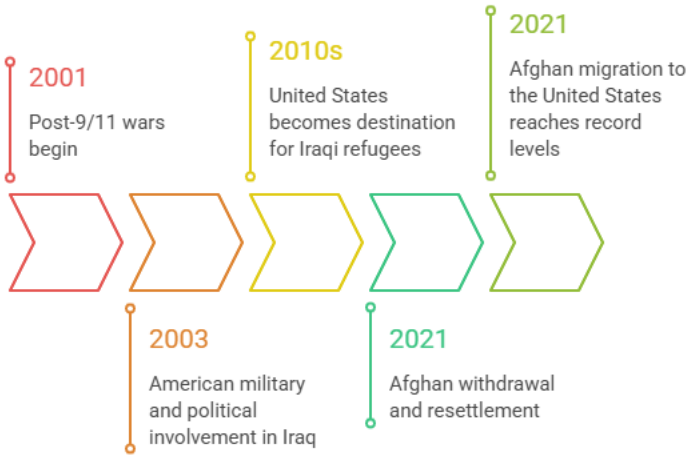


Figure 5. Post-9/11 Wars and Human Displacement Source *Center for American Progress (2013); Migration Policy Institute (2022); U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (n.d.), and possibly the Costs of War Project (2020, 2021)*

4.5 Radicalization Profiles in Practice

It was not only the 2016 attack on Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka that proved that educated, affluent, and technically adept young people could indulge in violence, challenging the poverty myth (Sageman 2008). This terrorist act, in which the offenders largely belonged to privately run, English medium, and economically well-off institutions of learning, is often used in the regional literature as an example of this phenomenon (Fair, Hamza, and Heller 2017; Riaz 2016).

The practitioner vignette is illustrative rather than independent evidence validating the convergence model. During a 2017 interrogation, an operative was asked why attacks might occur in the United States if grievances concerned US actions abroad. He replied: “Soon, they will be seeing us among them.”

4.6 Domestic Extremism and Foreign Amplification

The threat vectors discussed above do not function in a vacuum divorced from conditions within the United States. Domestic extremist groups in America have had their own independent evolution over the last two decades as a result of political polarization, economic insecurity, racism, and the very same online radicalization network that has come to dominate foreign jihadist recruitment (Sageman 2008; Zeitzoff 2017). The seminal study from Seth Jones at CSIS showed that the number of domestic right-wing extremist attacks in America increased from an average of five or fewer attacks per year from 2007 through 2011 to a total of thirty-

one attacks in 2017 alone. Figure 6 shows the evolution of this trend in three similar time frames (Jones 2018; Pew Research Center 2024).

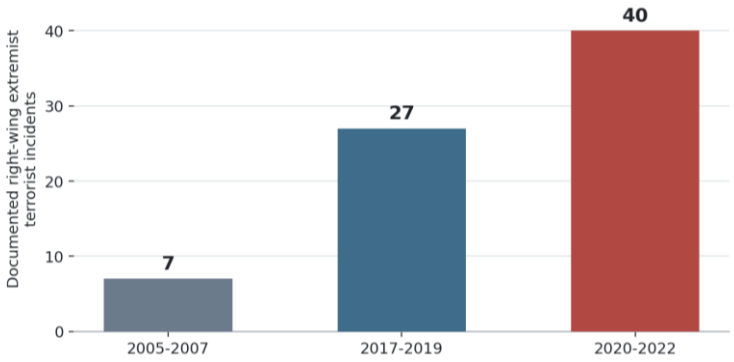


Figure 6. The Rising Trajectory of Right-Wing Extremist Terrorism in the United States Source*: Anti-Defamation League, Center on Extremism (2022)*

The START Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database, which contains thousands of individual cases, forms the factual basis for the identification of commonly observed demographic, psychological, and network-related radicalization pathways leading to American extremism, regardless of whether it is jihadist, far-right, or single-issue. The latest audit carried out by the Government Accountability Office has shown that although federal agencies have successfully conducted forty-nine out of fifty-eight necessary actions in terms of the domestic terrorism strategy, the strategy still does not have an assigned lead agency, performance measures, and risk assessments (START 2023; Government Accountability Office 2025a).

It should be noted that this internal division does not take place in a geopolitically neutral space. It has been established by various government studies conducted by the U.S. government, including studies aimed at demonstrating that there were attempts on the part of foreign states, especially Russia, to exploit existing divisions in the social and political life of the United States using disinformation tactics specifically designed to increase polarization instead of supporting any particular group in America (Government Accountability Office 2024; U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center 2020).

4.7 Global Divergence: Decline Abroad, Surge in the West

A remarkable confirmation to this compression can be found in the Global Terrorism Index 2025 where 93 percent of lethal terror activities in the West in 2025 were committed by lone wolves, with 42 percent of all youth-related terrorism investigations being carried out in Europe and North America, where the process of radicalization is now happening within a few months,

compared to the sixteen-month period of radicalization in 2002, and where 87 percent of the radicalized minors had records of having been neglected or abused (see Carthy and Schuurman 2024). This latter statistic represents an empirical proof to the significance-seeking and social exclusion mechanisms outlined above (Doosje et al. 2016; Pfundmair et al. 2022), as it is now mostly young people, not yet politically sophisticated, but psychologically vulnerable at their core, who are recruited into the process of radicalization (Bösing et al. 2024; Carthy and Schuurman 2024).

The report that the 2025 Global Terrorism Index has shown a 280 percent increase year over year in the number of victims of terrorism attacks in the West despite an overall decrease of 28 percent in deaths from global terrorism at its lowest point since 2007 is one example of what the argument made in this article predicts: The overall decrease in global organized, territorially based terrorism while there is a dramatic increase in hybrid, ideologically driven terrorism in regions with advanced polarization within society.

Table 3 summarizes selected findings from the Global Terrorism Index 2025.

Table 3. Selected Findings from the Global Terrorism Index 2025

Indicator	**Value**
Global terrorism deaths	5,582 (–28% year-over-year; lowest since 2007)
Global terrorism incidents	2,944 (–22% year-over-year)
Western-country terrorism fatalities	57 (+280% year-over-year)
Share of fatal Western attacks by lone actors	93%
Share of youth in Europe/North America terror investigations	42% of all cases
Radicalization timeline (2002 vs. 2025)	≈16 months → a few months
Radicalized minors with neglect/abuse history	87%
Most-impacted country	Pakistan (1,139 deaths; 1,045 incidents)
Sub-Saharan Africa share of global terrorism deaths	>50%

Source: Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2025.

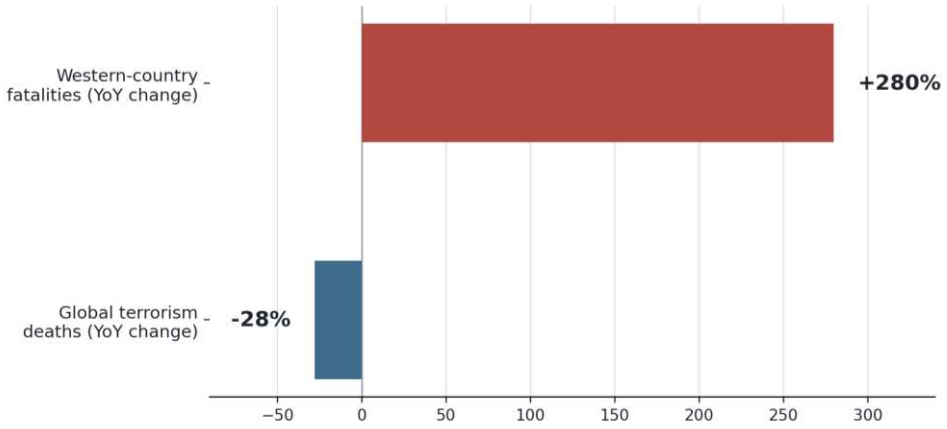


Figure 7. A Divergent Threat Curve: Global Decline, Western Surge (2024-2025) *Source: Anti-Defamation League, Center on Extremism (2022)*

The difference is clear from Figure 7: while global fatalities fell, deaths in Western states rose drastically. The difference confirms the convergence theory described in the article: territorial terrorism may be losing its strength globally, but decentralized, youthful, hybridized, and single-person terrorism is becoming more prominent in polarized Western societies.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Findings: The Convergence Model

Both external blowback and internal fragmentation are not mutually exclusive theories of the future risks of terrorism in America; the interaction between the two will be where the greatest risks lie: loose and leaderless networks, lone actor or small cell acts of terrorism, extremist ideologies that combine religious, racial, and antigovernment elements, and disinformation amplified by foreign actors in order to speed all of these processes up.

Three findings support the convergence thesis. First, the human and monetary costs of post-9/11 wars, displacement exceeding 38 million people, and the rise of ISIS indicate that counterterrorism was accompanied by new grievances and violent actors. Second, Bangladesh illustrates how weakened institutions can enable the return of suppressed extremist movements. Third, global and domestic data suggest that territorially based terrorism has declined while dispersed, lone-actor, and youth-related violence has become more prominent in polarized Western societies.

However, according to the review of the migration literature in Section 2.4 and the discussion of displacement statistics in Section 4.4, there is a narrower approach than that presented in the

current public debate. Displacement in itself does not represent a risk factor, but rather a conditional risk, when trauma remains unresolved along with failures of integration.

5.2 The Crisis of Counterterrorism Narratives

The findings can be seen to shed light on the issue of crisis in counterterrorism narratives identified earlier. From the reading, the post-9/11 rhetoric has been noted to legitimize only one side of the contested definition, and the findings have been seen to reveal the strategic price of such a move, since civilian casualties act as an input in causing future violence rather than being morally independent from the latter. Furthermore, a discourse that is unable to gain legitimacy among the very people it aims to help will only end up recreating the circumstances that it wants to destroy.

5.3 Policy Implications: Toward a Reconstructed Counterterrorism Narrative

Counterterrorism strategy that has been premised primarily on kinetic force and the elimination of individual operatives will continue to treat symptoms while leaving the generative structure of future radicalization intact. A more durable strategy requires action across four domains.

Policy should address four domains. First, the United States should rebuild the legitimacy of counterterrorism through transparency and accountability for civilian casualties. Second, refugee and immigrant integration should be treated as a security investment, with access to mental-health support, economic mobility, and civic participation; the relevant risk is failed integration, not migration itself. Third, counter-radicalization and community-resilience programmes should be rigorously evaluated and scaled in response to online recruitment. Evidence from NIJ and RAND suggests that mentoring and pathways to social status can be more effective than ideological rebuttal alone. Fourth, the Government Accountability Office's identified gaps in domestic strategy lead-agency responsibility, performance measures, and risk assessment should be addressed.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

These results are subject to the limitations outlined in Section 3.5. Further research may involve testing the model against data on the individual level such as PIRUS, as well as applying it to other post-transition countries and analyzing counter-radicalization programs of the type analyzed by NIJ and RAND. Future studies should also compare post-intervention settings and distinguish the effects of state capacity, trauma exposure, and online recruitment across populations and time periods, with transparent and comparable outcome measures.

6. Conclusion

The United States goes into its second quarter-century of the twenty-first century having expended trillions of dollars and, based upon credible independent estimates, been responsible for more than 1 million deaths and tens of millions of displacements as part of an effort to wage war against terrorism, itself a concept which continues to be highly controversial. In the view of this paper, the risk of terrorism that the United States faces over the next two decades must be seen not as a static external risk to be deterred, but rather as an emergent risk arising from the convergence of two historical trajectories, namely blowback from the human cost of the post-9/11 wars and internal domestic fragmentation due to polarization, online radicalization, and a contestable national identity. Without doing so, terrorism will cease being a foreign issue to be combatted from afar and begin to manifest itself as an integral part of the US security situation.

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