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Critical security research and the war on terror: From the margins to the mainstream?

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Abstract
Contemporary reckoning with the catastrophic outcomes of the post-9/11 era opens important questions for the future of counterterrorism policy. It also raises significant issues for thinking through the future priorities and purposes of security scholarship. In this article we make two core claims. First, recent years have seen considerable mainstreaming of ostensibly critical ideas on (counter)terrorism within political debate, media commentary, and – crucially – security policy. Second, such ideas – including around the futility of 'war' on terror; the ineffectiveness of torture; the unstable framing of threats such as radicalisation; and the inefficiency of excessive counterterrorism expenditure – were widely dismissed as lacking in policy relevance, even being utopian, when articulated by critically oriented scholars. This development, we argue, raises important ontological questions around the ending of security paradigms such as the war on terror. It also prompts vital political, epistemological, and normative questions around the status of overtly critical scholarship when its ideas and recommendations achieve wider currency.

Keywords: critical security studies; critical terrorism studies; critique; war on terror

Introduction

The 2021 withdrawal of US troops from the war in Afghanistan – the longest conflict in US history – offered an important opportunity for commentators and policymakers to take stock of the post-9/11 war on terror. Reflection on the consequences for Americans and others of that particular conflict, intertwined with sharp criticism of the withdrawal's instantiation and human costs, prompted wider reckoning with the 'war on terror's' 'scoresheet' 20 years on from the events of 11 September 2001. Prominent within this stock-taking, and surprising for seasoned observers of the war on terror, was a lack of censorship, and a lack of censuring, of very public criticisms of this paradigm's direct and indirect costs. As a result, forthright declamations of the conflict as expensive, ineffective, and even misguided entered mainstream media, policy, academic, and other discourse – declamations that would, in previous years, have been roundly decried as utopian or unpatriotic.

This increased appetite for criticising the war on terror at a distance of two decades from the 9/11 attacks not only engendered something of a shift in what could publicly be said. It also introduced new, and potentially surprising, proximities with academic literatures that had been making such claims from a position of (often deliberate) outsider status for many years. Those literatures include feminist, post-structural, post-colonial, and other 'critical' work on the war on terror,[1] as well

[1]See, among others, Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, 'Governing terrorism through risk: Taking precautions, (un) knowing the future', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:1 (2007), pp. 89–115; Andrew W. Neal, *Exceptionalism and*

as scholarship self-identifying as 'critical terrorism studies', a term that came to prominence five years or so after the 9/11 attacks.[2] Usefully conceptualised as a broad orientation, critical terrorism studies refused the conceptual, methodological, and political commitments of (counter)terrorism research as traditionally constituted, arguing for a departure from the presentist, problem-solving focus on contemporary non-state actors and the threat that they pose to Western states.[3]

Terrorism, for many of those working across critical terrorism and security scholarship, is most usefully approached not as an objective or extra-discursive threat to be countered. Rather, it is a socially constructed threat whose very existence is characterised by deeply political – and often deeply problematic – claims around its exceptionality and religious or ideological drivers. 'Our' responsibility as critical scholars, it follows, therefore often involves de-exceptionalising and deconstructing this threat, while contesting the wasteful, short-termist, and counterproductive efforts of Western states to counter terrorism via military campaigns, counter-radicalisation initiatives, and legal frameworks predicated on draconian and emergency measures.[4] Such concerns, as we demonstrate below, are remarkably similar to those found within mainstream sites of (counter)terrorism discourse and activity in the period accompanying 9/11's 20th anniversary.[5]

This article offers an original engagement with this surprising overlap between mainstream and critical terrorism discourse to generate three contributions to knowledge. First, empirically, it identifies and explores important changes in political and media discourse on the war on terror that emerged, in particular, from 2021 onwards. Although there are important heterogeneities here – as might be expected – we argue that distance from the 9/11 attacks facilitated a politically important softening in the limits of what was (critically) sayable about those attacks and their aftermath. From this, the article's second, analytical, contribution is to chart discursive and political (dis)continuities between contemporary mainstream evaluations of the war on terror and those found in the post-9/11 critical literature on terrorism and security.

The article's third, agenda-setting, contribution is to explore the significance of these contiguities for future scholarship on (counter)terrorism via an original typology of critical strategies. Specifically, we trace three different futures for work motivated thus, arguing that opportunity exists for: (i) capitalising on the scope for greater policy relevance engendered by contemporary discursive and political proximities; (ii) continuing or even sharpening previous efforts at outsider critiquing of contemporary counterterrorism architectures and paradigms; and, (iii) shifting attention via a reorientation of academic focus and efforts, for instance, through greater engagement with the assumptions, omissions, and biases of critical scholarship itself. These futures, to be clear, are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are archetypes within a heuristic, each containing their own challenges, opportunities, and elisions. Thus, the article does not establish a single 'correct' way for engaging with the war on terror's legacies today, not least because critical scholarship will continue to benefit from heterogeneous approaches. Our contention, instead, is that the present conjuncture offers opportunity for conscious reflection on the aims and purposes *of* critical scholarship. As such, the attractiveness of our three strategies will depend on several factors, including one's

the Politics of Counter-Terrorism: Liberty, Security and the War on Terror (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Kim Rygiel and Krista Hunt, (*En)gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[2]For an overview, see Lee Jarvis, 'Three waves of critical terrorism studies: Agenda-setting, elaboration, problematisation', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 17:3 (2024), pp. 463–87. available at {https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2356918}.

[3]Lee Jarvis, 'Critical terrorism studies after 9/11', in Richard Jackson (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 28–38 (pp. 29–30).

[4]Sondre Lindahl, 'A CTS model of counterterrorism', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:3 (2017), pp. 523–41.

[5]We use 'mainstream' in this article in both an institutional and an ideological sense. In the former, it captures commentary or action emanating from established or hegemonic sites of political, media, and other activity. In the latter, it captures thought or activity positively disposed toward the war on terror's ambitions, and either explicitly or implicitly oriented towards assisting with these. The term is, inevitably, a fluid one because the meaning of 'mainstream' has an additional relational component via its opposition to that which is deemed critical, and because understandings of the mainstream within a particular policy area vary over time. Our usage, therefore, draws on Robert Cox's discussion of 'problem-solving theory', as well as accounts of 'mainstream' expertise within critical terrorism studies scholarship. See Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

reading of the proximity between contemporary mainstream and critical perspectives, and one's view of the purposes and agency of critical scholars and scholarship.

Rewriting the war on terror?

Opposition to the war on terror is not new. From its opening salvos that included, *inter alia*, the near-uncontested passage of the USA PATRIOT Act and a launching of military operations in Afghanistan, through to the collapse of that intervention some 20 years later, there have always been opponents to what George W. Bush termed 'the world's fight … civilization's fight … the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom'.[6] In the earliest stages of this new paradigm, however, political and media opposition remained frequently isolated and diminished, particularly (though not exclusively) in a United States governed by a president enjoying near-record approval ratings.[7] Barbara Lee, a Democrat member of the House of Representatives, for instance, was the only member of either chamber of Congress to vote against the resolution authorising the Afghanistan operation in 2001. For this stance, she was openly criticised, ridiculed even, with the *Wall Street Journal* calling her a 'clueless liberal',[8] and personal correspondence denouncing her as a terrorist, communist, and traitor. In the words of one letter writer: 'You should have been in the Trade Towers you anti-American [expletive]. Drop dead!!!'. For another, relatedly: 'you stand with Bin Laden & Hitler & Judas'.[9] Censorship and self-censorship, as Judith Butler argued in relation to the then-unfolding war in Afghanistan, were therefore rife, given how:

> the raw public mockery of the peace movement, the characterization of antiwar demonstrations as anachronistic or nostalgic, work to produce a consensus of public opinion that profoundly marginalizes antiwar sentiment and analysis, putting into question in a very strong way the very value of dissent as part of contemporary U.S. democratic culture.[10]

This stifling of political debate and dissent – and the urgency it injected unto militaristic and legislative responses to 9/11 from extraordinary rendition to detentions at Guantanamo Bay and beyond – found echo beyond the United States. In the UK, stringent measures were rapidly introduced despite opposition from legal professionals and human rights advocates,[11] with the far-reaching 2001 Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act passing through Parliament in December that year. So extensive were such measures, indeed, that Lord Hoffman, in ruling with other law-lords that the detention of foreign nationals without charge under the 2001 legislation was contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights (and, thus against British law, enshrined in the 1998 Human Rights Act) stated: 'The real threat to the life of the nation, in the sense of a people living in accordance with its traditional laws and political values, comes not from terrorism but from laws such as these.'[12] Their position as the most senior legal officials in the country was insufficient

[6]George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 September 2001, available at {https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html}.

[7]Richard C. Eichenberg, Richard J. Stoll, and Matthew Lebo, 'War president: The approval ratings of George W. Bush', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50:6 (2006), pp. 783–808.

[8]Gillian Brockell, 'She was the only member of Congress to vote against war in Afghanistan. Some called her a traitor', *Washington Post* (17 August 2021), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/08/17/barbara-lee-afghanistan-vote/}.

[9]Conor Friedersdorf, 'Angry letters to the one member of Congress who voted against the war on terror', *The Atlantic* (14 September 2014), available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/the-vindication-of-barbara-lee/380084/}. It should be noted that the Congresswoman also received letters supportive of her decision.

[10]Judith Butler, 'Explanation and exoneration, or what we can hear', *Grey Room*, 7 (2002), pp. 56–67.

[11]E.g. Amnesty International, 'Amnesty International's Memorandum to the UK Government on Part 4 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, EUR 45/017/2002' (5 September 2002), available at: {https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur450172002en.pdf}.

[12]Robert Verkaik, 'Law lords condemn Blunkett's terror measures', *The Independent* (17 December 2004), available at: {https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/law-lords-condemn-blunkett-s-terror-measures-691986.html}.

to prevent the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* decrying Lord Hoffman and his peers as 'Loony Lords' and dismissing his comments as 'piffle'.[13]

The censoring and discrediting of opposition apparent throughout the war on terror's first decade was often accompanied by triumphalist declarations of success, or even 'victory'.[14] President Bush's May 2023 'Mission Accomplished' speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* memorably framed the Iraq war in this way. Barack Obama's 2013 speech at the National Defense University did similar for the killing of Osama bin Laden:

> Today, Osama bin Laden is dead, and so are most of his top lieutenants. There have been no large-scale attacks on the United States, and our homeland is more secure. Fewer of our troops are in harm's way, and over the next 19 months they will continue to come home. Our alliances are strong, and so is our standing in the world. In sum, we are safer because of our efforts.[15]

Former policy advisors William McCants and William Rosenau had gone further still two years earlier in a piece for *The Atlantic*, arguing: 'Ten years into our struggle against al-Qaeda, it's time to acknowledge that the "war" is over.'[16]

Fast forward another decade, however, and a rather different set of conclusions were being reached. The marking of 9/11's 20th anniversary was accompanied by the collapse of Western intervention in Afghanistan, the fall of Kabul, and the chaotic attempt to airlift American and allied personnel and (some) Afghan helpers before the Taliban's August 2021 return to power. Triumphalist declarations of victory, on this anniversary, were replaced by commentary pieces declaring the war on terror a failure. George Conway, for instance, a moderate Republican commentator, took to social media to share the following damning evaluation:

> Perhaps the most effective, and cost-effective, thing that the United States did to prevent another 9/11 was to order the reinforcement of cockpit doors on commercial aircraft. *Much of the rest was unproductive, counterproductive, tragically costly, or all of these.*[17]

Pulitzer Prize finalist Garret Graff, in a September 2021 piece, referred, similarly, to the war on terror as a 'colossal miscalculation', arguing:

> The United States – as both a government and a nation – *got nearly everything about our response wrong*, on the big issues and the little ones … by almost any other measure, the War on Terror has weakened the nation – leaving Americans more afraid, less free, more morally compromised, and more alone in the world.[18]

Graff, in this piece, reminds us that the United States' well-established process of arresting terrorist suspects, trying them in domestic courts, and imprisoning the guilty in federal jails – of pursuing, in other words, a counterterrorism response grounded in the criminal justice system and rule of law – was jettisoned in favour of one organised around 'enemy combatants', extraordinary rendition, torture, and shadowy black site prisons. Indeed, the creation of the Department for Homeland

[13]'Loony Lords, Sun says', *The Sun* (17 December 2004) {accessed through Factivia}.

[14]Lee Jarvis, *Times of Terror: Discourse, Temporality and the War on Terror* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 122–31.

[15]Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the National Defense University', 23 May 2013, available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university}.

[16]William McCants and William Rosenau, '10 years later: How we won', *The Atlantic* (8 September 2011), available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/10-years-later-how-we-won/244684/}.

[17]George Conway, Twitter (31 August 2021), available at: {https://mobile.twitter.com/gtconway3d/status/1432582606651068417}. Emphasis added.

[18]Garret Graff, 'After 9/11, the U.S. got almost everything wrong', *The Atlantic* (8 September 2021), available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/after-911-everything-wrong-war-terror/620008/}. Emphasis added.

Security, for Graff,[19] militarised domestic law enforcement; exacerbated racial tensions, culminating in the Black Lives Matter protests (and responses); and prioritised security concerns within immigration decisions. America's war on terror, in this evaluation, involved support for unsavoury allies in places like Afghanistan, the domestic inflammation of Islamophobic and other forms of racism, *and*, indeed, the overlooking of domestic terrorism which has now killed more Americans than 9/11.[20]

Similar sentiment was apparent elsewhere in the mainstream media, too. Journalist Michael Hirsch, in a *Foreign Policy* article titled 'How the US got 9/11 wrong', cited former US ambassador, Earl Anthony Wayne thus:

> Part of what we got wrong was thinking we could do too much with our hard power … There's a certain place for using hard power against specific hard targets who are carrying out terrorist activities. That can be valuable. What happened is we tried to use that hard power too broadly, thinking it could help us transform entire nations, and in the process, we made serious mistakes that actually created more new terrorists.[21]

William Galston argued similarly in a piece for the centrist Brookings Institute, suggesting, 'Osama bin Laden has won a sweeping if posthumous victory', as the United States has made, in the 20 years since 9/11, an, 'enormous series of blunders'.[22] In this analysis, the United States' war on terror weakened its international alliances and global strategic position, depriving other areas of the American state and polity of much-needed resources:

> Important government functions suffered, including the emergency health stockpile that was all but empty when we needed it the most in the early months of the pandemic … A more measured response to the attack on our homeland would have made us stronger at home, with no loss of security.[23]

Slightly earlier than the above pieces, Thrall and Goepner, writing on the 'failed war on terror' for the libertarian Cato Institute had argued: 'it has become clear that the American strategy has destabilized the Middle East while doing little to protect the United States from terrorism'.[24] This failure, they argue, stemmed from an overinflated sense of the terrorism threat, as well as the adoption of aggressive military responses:

> It is time for the United States to take a different approach. Policymakers need to acknowledge that although terrorism is a serious concern, *it represents only a modest security threat to the American homeland*. Further, the United States should abandon the use of military intervention and nation building in the War on Terror. Instead, the United States should push regional partners to confront terrorist groups abroad, while the U.S. returns to an emphasis *on the intelligence and law enforcement paradigm* for combating the threat against the American homeland.[25]

[19] Graff, 'After 9/11'.

[20] Graff, 'After 9/11'.

[21] Michael Hirsch, 'How the US got 9/11 wrong', *Foreign Policy* (7 September 2021), available at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/07/sept-11-united-states-20-years-failed-foreign-policy/}.

[22] William A. Galston 'How America's response to 9/11 contributed to our national decline', *Brookings Institute* (27 August 2021), available at: {https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/08/27/how-americas-response-to-9-11-contributed-to-our-national-decline/}.

[23] Galston, 'America's response'.

[24] A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, 'Step back: Lessons for U.S. foreign policy from the failed war on terror', *Cato Institute* (26 June 2017), available at: {https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/step-back-lessons-us-foreign-policy-failed-war-terror#}.

[25] Thrall and Goepner, 'Step back'. Emphasis added.

Influential commentators such as terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman declared 'mixed results' from the 20-year-long campaign in a piece for the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, such that, 'Bin Laden would likely be pleased if he were alive today'.[26] An editorial in the right-leaning UK broadsheet *The Times*, meanwhile, went further in its declaration of defeat in an epilogue for the war on terror worth citing at length:

> With hindsight, the US response to the terrorist attacks has been a disaster. The West must learn from its mistakes … Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that this war has been lost. The decision to go into Afghanistan was justified. But what followed has been a disaster that has left the West weaker, less united and more vulnerable than it was 20 years ago. Far more American lives, not to mention those of its allies including Britain, have been lost in Afghanistan and Iraq than were lost on 9/11, not to mention the millions of citizens of those countries killed, wounded or displaced. And while it is true that there has not been another terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11 in the West, in large part because of better security and policing, there have been countless smaller scale attacks across America and Europe, including in Britain. Indeed, America's wars helped to radicalise a generation of Islamists, whose poisonous ideology has spread across the Middle East to Africa, from where new terrorist franchises plot fresh attacks on the West.[27]

Such commentary spoke to the positioning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as 'twin calamities' even in more upbeat assessments such as Landler's in the *New York Times*.[28] Even former CIA agent Elliott Ackerman, discussing the war on terror's 'successes' – al-Qaeda's reduced effectiveness, Bin Laden's death, and the absence of major post-9/11 attacks on the US homeland – ponders the question: 'could success and failure coexist?'.[29]

War on terror redux?

These calls to abandon or belatedly condemn the war on terror might, simply, be a product of a problem needing a solution. Foreign policy decisions require explanation,[30] and constructions of past errors – especially when attributed to previous administrations – offer useful narrative devices through which to articulate substantive political change. It is not, however, the case, and it is not our argument here, that commentary has entirely or universally shifted toward critical evaluation of the war on terror.[31] Instead, in more hawkish accounts, including some of those mentioned above, we encounter attempts to hive off 'the bad war on terror' (typically Iraq and Afghanistan) from 'the good war on terror'. Hoffman, for instance, argues that 'kinetic' operations such as Afghanistan and Iraq were mistaken, but that 'the war on terror is not going away however much we might wish it would … [given that] our enemies have incontrovertibly chosen to continue this war'.[32] Thus, what is needed, for such authors, is not an abandonment of the war on terror in its entirety, but rather a shift in focus and tactics toward 'a more dedicated and comprehensive effort to better counter the ideology and narrative of our enemies and equip our regional and local friends and allies with the tools to also better resist these threats'.[33]

[26]B. Hoffman, 'The war on terror 20 years on: Crossroads or cul-de-sac?' *Tony Blair Institute* (18 March 2021), available at: {https://institute.global/policy/war-terror-20-years-crossroads-or-cul-de-sac}.

[27]'The Times view on remembering 9/11', *The Times* (13 September 2021).

[28]Mark Landler, '20 years on, the war on terror grinds along, with no end in sight', *New York Times* (10 September 2021), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/europe/war-on-terror-bush-biden-qaeda.html}.

[29]Elliot Ackerman, 'Winning ugly: What the war on terror cost America', *Foreign Affairs*, 100:5 (2021), pp. 66–101 (p. 68).

[30]Roxanne Lynne Doty, 'Foreign policy as social construction: A post-positivist analysis of US counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines', *International Studies Quarterly*, 37:3 (1993), pp. 297–320.

[31]See, e.g., Hoffman, 'War on terror', and Landler, '20 years on'; Jack Holland, 'Foreign policy and political possibility', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:1 (2013), pp. 49–68.

[32]Hoffman, 'War on terror'.

[33]Hoffman, 'War on terror'.

Such calls for a refocusing of the war on terror's energies sit alongside basic facts including the United States and its allies' continuing heavy engagement in counterterrorism operations across the globe. The Costs of War Project at Brown University's Watson Institute, to illustrate, notes that the United States is involved in counterterrorism operations in some 85 countries across the globe.[34] And while drone strikes have reduced in some theatres of conflict, such as Pakistan, they have increased elsewhere.[35] The UK government is currently moving towards another piece of major counterterrorism legislation with its planned Protect Duty, which will impose new security responsibilities upon public spaces including retail and hospitality sites. And in 2022, the Independent Shawcross Review of Prevent – the UK's divisive counter-radicalisation strategy – controversially recommended that it refocus attention upon radical Islamist ideologies:

> Prevent must return to its core mission – countering all those ideologies that can lead people to committing or supporting acts of terrorism. This can only be done if Prevent properly understands the nature of these ideologies and how they attract and suborn individuals … the facts clearly demonstrate that the most lethal threat in the last 20 years has come from Islamism, and this threat continues.[36]

Therefore, where terrorism recedes from public consciousness – 2023 polling from the United States suggests the number of people concerned about terrorism has fallen to its lowest level since 9/11;[37] in a UK poll in May 2023, terrorism did not feature in a list of 15 issues about which the public were most concerned[38] – those arguing for a continued focus on this threat have tended to stress its ideological/communicative dimension, while emphasising the divide between 'radical' or 'extreme' Islam and Western interests.[39]

Those agitating for a continuation of the war on terror, put otherwise, appear to be working to position this struggle as (i) primarily ideological, the chief concern of which should be radical Islamism and its arguments, and (ii) one whose kinetic dimensions are to be outsourced such that the exertion and deployment of force should not be done by American, or 'Western' men and women, but rather by 'others' local to where conflict is occurring, and/or through technologies such as drones. President Biden's pointed comment, following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan that 'American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves',[40] is perhaps the clearest statement of this reluctance to commit personnel to counterterrorism/counterinsurgency operations.

Outsourcing kinetic violence and (re)emphasising ideological contestation, we argue, are both practices which seek to maintain and continue a 'war on terror'. Both reformulate the terms of engagement while (re)emphasising the otherness of 'terrorists' and exteriorising the conflict against them. The potential irony, though, is that such an attempt to resituate the war on terror away from a 'forever war' – explicitly so in the case of Biden, who stated of Afghanistan, 'I was not going

[34]Stephanie Savell, 'United States counterterrorism operations, 2018–2020', *Costs of War Project* (February 2021), available at: {https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/US%20Counterterrorism%20Operations%202018-2020%2C%20Costs%20of%20War.pdf}.

[35]David Sterman, 'The state of America's drone wars in 2022', *New America* (14 December 2022), available at: {https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/blog/the-state-of-americas-drone-wars-in-2022/}.

[36]William Shawcross, *Independent Review of Prevent* (February 2023), p. 3; available at: {https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1134986/Independent_Review_of_Prevent.pdf}.

[37]Gallup, *Terrorism* (undated), available at: {https://news.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx}.

[38]'Latest GB Voting Intention', *Redfield and Witton Strategies* (7 May 2023), available at: {https://redfieldandwiltonstrategies.com/latest-gb-voting-intention-7-may-2023/}.

[39]Stuart Macdonald, Andrew Whiting, and Lee Jarvis, 'Evidence and ideology in the independent review of Prevent', *Journal for Deradicalization*, 39 (2024), pp. 40–76.

[40]Joseph R. Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan', 16 August 2021, available at: {https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/}.

to extend this forever war'[41] – may actually be setting the context for precisely such a temporal extension of the war on terror. In refocusing the war on terror away from kinetic large-scale military engagements and towards a struggle for 'hearts and minds', the war on terror may be finding a different way to become a forever war. For, as Combes notes, while enemies may be killed, armies vanquished, and so on, hearts and minds can never be won in a totalising sense:

> The potential in the counterinsurgent's mind for another 'enemy Other' to be hiding among 'friendly Others' suggests that the war can never be fully or successfully won. As such, COIN [counterinsurgency] is self-perpetuating, a forever war.[42]

This reworking of the war on terror's logics forces reflection on the colonial roots which, for many, underpin it.[43] Derek Gregory, in 2004, argued that the war on terror is, at its heart, a violent reassertion of principles which have underpinned Western colonialism for centuries: 'For what else is the war on terror other than the violent return of the colonial past, with its split geographies of "us" and "them", "civilization" and "barbarism", "Good" and "Evil"?'[44] The war on terror's underpinning by such Orientalist binaries is a theme to which critical scholars have returned on multiple occasions.[45] Particularly apposite here is Angharad Closs Stephens's reminder that ostensibly critical interventions may inadvertently reproduce the very colonial mindsets which undergird the war on terror. Writing at 9/11's 10-year anniversary, when Obama's election appeared to have engendered a shift in the war on terror, she argues that the passing of the Bush administration's more egregious violences should not blind us to the deeply engrained patterns of colonial thought in US and Western policy concerning terrorism:

> it is worth reminding ourselves that the challenge of thinking beyond the imaginative geographies of 'us' and 'them', 'civilized' and 'backward' was always a broader challenge than the by now redundant hobby of Bush-bashing.[46]

Our point here is that the concepts, language, aims, and ambitions of the war on terror have not been subjected to the overwhelming critical rejection that might be intuited from commentary accompanying the withdrawal from Afghanistan in particular. Indeed, it is clear from the section above, and from a glance at security/military deployments and legislative agendas, that whilst contemporary political elites may eschew the language of the 'war on terror' and have little appetite for direct interventions by Western troops, the appeal of measures against terrorism, including those which contributed to many of the issues, injustices, and errors of the earlier 'war on terror' period – from extrajudicial killings, to the demonisation of Islam, to culturally essentialist

[41] Cited in Amanda Macias, 'Biden says the era of U.S. nation building is over as he marks the end of the Afghanistan war', *CNBC* (31 August 2021), available at: {https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/31/biden-addresses-the-end-of-the-us-war-in-afghanistan.html}.

[42] deRaismes Combes, 'Counterinsurgency in (un)changing times? Colonialism, hearts and minds, and the war on terror', *International Relations*, 36:4 (2022), pp. 547–67. This notion that the forever wars are not ending but being repurposed had already been noted in US commentary at the time of the Afghan withdrawal; see, for instance, Asma Khalid, 'Biden says he's ended the "forever wars", but some say they've just shrunk', *NPR* (3 September 2021), available at: {https://www.npr.org/2021/09/03/1034137444/biden-says-hes-ended-the-forever-wars-but-some-say-theyve-just-shrunk}; Jacob Silverman, 'The forever wars aren't ending. They're just being rebranded', *New Republic* (28 July 2021), available at: {https://newrepublic.com/article/163088/forever-wars-arent-ending-theyre-just-rebranded}.

[43] E.g. Rabea M. Khan, 'Race, coloniality and the post 9/11 counter-discourse: Critical Terrorism Studies and the reproduction of the Islam-Terrorism discourse', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 498–501; Combes, 'Counterinsurgency'.

[44] Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2004), p. 11.

[45] See, among others, Nisha Kapoor, 'On the North West 10(12): Postcoloniality, the British racial state and the war on terror', *Identities*, 20:1 (2013), pp. 61–76; Josef Teboho and Barkawi, 'Utile forms: Power and knowledge in small war', *Review of International Studies*, 40:1 (2014), pp. 3–24; Stefan Aune, *Indian Wars Everywhere: Colonial Violence and the Shadow Doctrines of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

[46] Angharad Closs Stephens, 'Beyond imaginative geographies? Critique, co-optation, and imagination in the aftermath of the War on Terror', *Environment and Planning: D*, 29:2 (2011), pp. 254–67 (p. 265).

readings of world politics as a 'clash of civilisations', to support for drone strikes, and beyond – remains in evidence, in no small part because the fundamental patterns of colonial thought underpinning the original war on terror remain largely unaltered. As outlined in the Special Issue introduction, it is hard to look beyond the Israeli violence in Gaza following the 7 October 2023 attacks – with a death toll of more than 35,000 at the time of writing[47] – for immediate illustration of this twinning of excessive force and enemy othering as counterterrorism's prominent logics.

Critical terrorism thinking gone mainstream?

The above calls for repurposing the war on terror's focus and logics are important for our purposes because they appear to speak to a gradual mainstreaming of *some* critical views which were, at the war on terror's outset, heretical, even taboo. It is, as we have seen, now relatively common to find authors from both left and right expressing arguments which, if enunciated in the autumn of 2001, would have been decried, dismissed, and derided. In this section, we discuss four instances of congruence between these arguments – concerning material instantiations of (counter)terrorism and its discursive framing – and long-standing claims within critical terrorism scholarship.[48]

First is the long-standing argument within critical terrorism scholarship that military force would prove remarkably unproductive as a form of counterterrorism strategy.[49] The reasons for this are multiple. First, military power typically offers an ineffective set of resources with which to attack terrorist organisations lacking the infrastructure or centres of gravity of more traditional military targets. Second, military power may be counterproductive, in that it may generate resentment among populations geographically proximate to, or who identify with, targeted organisations. Terrorist organisations, importantly, rely upon the ideological and practical support of wider communities; therefore, military strikes by external agents – and their associated 'collateral damage' – risk increasing this support. Third, military force has significant financial, human, and political costs for its wielders as well as its targets; hence, casualties within Western forces have potential to generate a 'body bag effect' and depopularise a conflict in the eyes of the host nation. On top of this, the financial costs of military campaigns and the logistics upon which such campaigns rely are often considerable and, as a result, potentially unpopular.

A second argument concerns the opportunity costs of counterterrorism, whereby money dedicated to counterterrorism campaigns – including, but not limited to, military excursions abroad – might more productively have been spent on other social or political priorities: whether relating to health, education, the environment, or beyond.[50] Depending on our conceptualisation of security (a notoriously contestable term as readers will know), reprioritising political spending toward other ambitions would not only contribute to the resolution of potentially more urgent challenges. It could also generate additional security for British or American publics by reducing other forms of structural or indirect violence or harm such as caused by poverty or illiteracy. As President Eisenhower famously argued in his 'Chance for Peace' speech: 'Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger

[47] Jake Horton, Shayan Sardarizadeh, and Adam Durbin, 'Gaza war: Why is the UN citing lower death toll for women and children?', *BBC* (16 May 2024), available at: {https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-69014893}.

[48] The ongoing violence in Gaza, indeed, has opened space for a much wider reconsideration of the very language of 'terrorism', evident in the BBC's 2023 resolve not to characterise Hamas as 'terrorists' because, in the words of John Simpson, veteran foreign correspondent: 'Terrorism is a loaded word, which people use about an outfit they disapprove of morally.'

[49] Richard Jackson, Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning, and Marie Breen Smyth, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 231–3; Philippe Eugène Duhart, 'Talking with terrorists, talking with governments: Insurgent perspectives on legitimisation and engagement', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:3 (2019), pp. 395–415 (p. 411).

[50] Jackson et al., *Terrorism*.

and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone.'[51]

Third is the overwhelming contemporary tendency to frame the terrorism threat within explicitly militarised language. This lexicon, which pre-dated 9/11, became particularly pronounced after those attacks, with the near-immediate declaration of 'war' on terror by President Bush.[52] It was, moreover, importantly taken up by those critical of Bush's regime – including his successor Barack Obama[53] – helping to consolidate its feeling of appropriateness.[54] For critical terrorism scholarship, the framing is a problematic one because how we articulate political problems generates expectations around their resolution.[55] Militaristic framings of terrorism, in this instance, help legitimise the use of military power as the appropriate way of addressing this threat – at the same time as they *de*legitimise alternative counterterrorism approaches.

Fourth, and underpinning all of the above, is a wider claim that the terrorism threat has been 'overblown', in John Mueller's memorable terminology.[56] This overstating is both an absolute one, such that the danger posed by terrorism is far more moderate than might typically be assumed. It is also a relative one, in that other forms of danger – including from seemingly banal sources – may be far more generative of harm or insecurity than attention-grabbing risks such as terrorism.[57] Important, here, is the tendency of terrorism to remain clustered or concentrated within very specific geographical contexts, in particular in places experiencing wider ongoing conflicts – a tendency which runs counter to common perceptions of this threat's omnipresence in relatively secure spaces within, say, the Global North.

These four positions or arguments that have been vital in the post-9/11 consolidation of critical terrorism scholarship can all be seen in the mainstream discourses examined above in the article: from suggestions that a warfare model is an inappropriate or ineffective means to deal with terrorism,[58] to arguments that money spent on counterterrorism security denied resources to other areas of public policy which might have had better security outcomes;[59] from concerns about the limits of warfare models for countering terrorism,[60] to assertions that the threat posed by terrorism has been exaggerated or hyperbolised.[61] Does this, then, mean that 'critical' ideas about (counter)terrorism are now firmly embedded in the mainstream? Or is there less to this ostensible convergence than at first meets the eye?

Implications for critical scholarship: Three futures

The above discussion raises the question of what the degree of convergence between mainstream media discourse and counterterrorism policy, on the one hand, and critical scholarship on the

[51] Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Address "The Chance for Peace" delivered before the American Society of Newspaper Editors', 16 April 1953, *The American Presidency Project*, available at: {https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-chance-for-peace-delivered-before-the-american-society-newspaper-editors}.

[52] Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[53] Trevor McCrisken, 'Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice', *International Affairs*, 87:4 (2011), pp. 781–801.

[54] Richard Jackson, 'Culture, identity and hegemony: Continuity and (the lack of) change in US counterterrorism policy from Bush to Obama', *International Politics*, 48:2/3 (2011), pp. 390–411.

[55] Lee Jarvis, 'Terrorism, counter-terrorism, and critique: Opportunities, examples, and implications', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:2 (2019), pp. 339–58 (pp. 342–3).

[56] John E. Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[57] John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, 'Terrorism and bathtubs: Comparing and assessing the risks', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33:1 (2021), pp. 138–63.

[58] 'The Times View'.

[59] Galston, 'America's response'.

[60] Hirsch, 'How the US got 9/11 wrong'.

[61] Thrall and Goepner, 'Step back'.

other, means for the latter's present/future status and purposes? Is this convergence – on the most traditionally 'high' issues of national security – grounds for cautious optimism around potentially progressive security futures? Alternatively, does it pose risks for the distinctiveness, detachedness, or sustainability of critical security paradigms? Or, indeed, does the appearance of overlap here mask deeper discontinuities between critical and mainstream thinking? In this final section of our article, we describe three strategies critical scholars might deploy to respond to this convergence: capitalisation, continuation, and 'criticalisation'.

Capitalise?

A first response to the apparent partial convergence explored above might be for critical researchers to (seek to) capitalise on the opportunities it provides for producing scholarship with obvious policy relevance. Doing so might involve softening any inherently antagonistic stance towards, say, policymakers, the military, or 'embedded' think-tanks sometimes found within critical approaches, and seeking to deepen or strengthen relationships with those in positions of decision-making power.

The appropriateness of engaging with security policymakers and practitioners has been much debated across critical literatures on terrorism and security. In contrast to the pragmatism of other non-traditional research paradigms such as human security,[62] explicitly critical scholarship often maintains, or advocates, a detachedness towards policy communities and decisions. There are at least three grounds for this.[63] First is dissatisfaction with the meta-theoretical underpinnings of policy-relevant work, which is typically associated with positivist or 'mainstream' epistemologies. This association makes sense, given the confidence needed for the claims to objectivity, generalisability, and inferable future scenarios upon which policy prescriptions are often founded. It also feeds into an imagined hierarchy of knowledge in which advocates of critical scholarship may claim a privileged purity on account of a refusal to compromise with more worldly concerns.

A second reason for reticence is that aspirations towards policy relevance risk jeopardising the detachedness of critical scholarship by bringing it uncomfortably closer to unpalatable moments, structures, and agents of violence. As Richard Jackson put it in his unenthusiastic summary of critical terrorism studies' efforts to marry policy relevance to emancipatory ideals:[64]

> It now seems clear that believing we could balance access to policymakers and having policy relevance with prioritising human security, critiquing the use of violence (including by the state), the promotion of nonviolence, 'outsider theorising', and anti- hegemony, was a little naïve. At the very least, it failed to fully appreciate that such a stance rested on a series of implicit assumptions about states as benign institutions and policymaking as a fairly open, rational process.[65]

The charge here goes beyond one of political naivety, however, because, as Jackson continues:

> it can be argued that scholars who work with the state in either designing or enacting its counterterrorism practices – through advising practitioners working on the implementation of counter-radicalisation programmes, for example – may result in reducing harms to some potential victims. However, *the overall primary effect is the legitimisation and perpetuation of the broader system of counterterrorism, rather than its dismantling or destruction*.[66]

[62]Edward Newman, 'Critical human security studies', *Review of International Studies*, 36:1 (2010), pp. 77–94 (pp. 87–8).

[63]James Fitzgerald, Nadya Ali, and Megan Armstrong, 'Editors' introduction: Critical terrorism studies: Reflections on policy-relevance and disciplinarity', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

[64]See also Asim Qureshi, 'Experiencing the war "of" terror: A call to the critical terrorism studies community', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13:3 (2020), pp. 485–99.

[65]Richard Jackson, 'To be or not to be policy relevant? Power, emancipation and resistance in CTS research', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 120–25 (p. 121).

[66]Jackson, 'To be or not to be', p. 122. Emphasis added.

Jackson raises important questions around engaging with governmental bodies and agencies. Beyond a general legitimisation of security paradigms, such cooperation also risks tarnishing critical researcher(s) – perhaps irrevocably – in the eyes of marginal, marginalised, and dispossessed groups (many of whom may also be potential research collaborators). Seeking to engage beyond the state does not automatically fix this issue; due to the complexity of the terrain of civil society, connections to one set of actors may also 'tarnish' researchers' reputations with others. Such dynamics might compromise the very ability of critical scholars to do research, especially that which seeks to foreground the voices and experiences of those traditionally overlooked by more mainstream research.[67]

This fear of slippage between engagement and legitimation has its precursors elsewhere too. As Owen summarises of David Chandler's critique of the human security literature: 'Having sought to engage with state policy in order to change it – the very entity it purports to critique – human security has been co-opted and appropriated by state advocates (realists, neoconservatives, liberal internationalists) as a way of advancing their neocolonial or imperial ambitions.'[68] As these different experiences imply, the risk of 'co-option' and/or (inadvertent) legitimisation is endemic and cannot be 'designed out' of a piece of research – not least because academics have limited control over how their work is understood and used by others.[69] Much depends on the ability – or serendipity – of researchers to connect with sufficiently open-minded policymakers or officials, as well as the contextual existence of particular political openings where critical interventions might be deemed relevant.

A third reason to be sceptical about engaging with policy makers in this area concerns what many view as the racist or colonial underpinnings of contemporary (counter)terrorism policy noted above. What does it mean, if we understood the war on terror thus, to invite, or expect, critical scholars to engage with such dynamics? Doing so raises difficult questions about researcher positionality and privilege,[70] such that engagement may be easier for white researchers beyond the immediate purview of such logics and dynamics, or, perhaps, for those less concerned with their co-option by racist infrastructures and discourses of security. Asking or enjoining researchers - including researchers of colour or anti-racist scholar-activists - to cooperate with, or seek to improve, what they deem inherently oppressive policies and measures may be both unproductive and unethical. Manchanda's recent sketch of an anti-racist security studies is instructive here, with the argument that 'international security studies must jettison any impulse or inducement towards salvation and must instead embrace abolition'[71] – an embrace that involves, among other things, engaging with movements and non-state organisations such as Black Lives Matter with their radically different approaches to (in)security, campaigning for reparations, and engaging with non-traditional understandings of security and its adjacent concepts.[72]

Our positing capitalisation as a first response to (apparent, partial) convergence between mainstream and critical discourse on the war on terror is possible, of course, because the political and moral caution implied by the above is not universal within contemporary critical scholarship. There are, for instance, many with greater hope in the capacity for change within the state's security

[67]E.g. Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, 'Vernacular securities and their study: A qualitative analysis and research agenda', *International Relations*, 27:2 (2013), pp. 158–79.

[68]Taylor Owen, 'The critique that doesn't bite: A response to David Chandler's "Human Security: The Dog That Didn't Bark"', *Security Dialogue*, 39:4 (2008), pp. 445–53 (p. 445). See also Matt McDonald, 'Human security and the construction of security', *Global Society*, 16:3 (2002), pp. 277–95 (pp. 281–2).

[69]Christina Boswell, 'Knowledge, legitimation and the politics of risk: The functions of research in public debates on migration', *Political Studies*, 57:1 (2009), pp. 165–86.

[70]For a recent discussion of the politics of positionality and privilege, see Jasmine K. Gani and Rabea M. Khan, 'Positionality statements as a function of coloniality: Interrogating reflexive methodologies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 68:2 (2024), p. sqae038.

[71]Nivi Manchanda, 'The banalization of race in international security studies: From absolution to abolition', *Security Dialogue*, 52:1suppl (2021), pp. 49–59 (p. 54).

[72]Ibid., pp. 54–5.

frameworks, such as found within Toros's[73] response to Jackson's comments.[74] Although wary of the perks, professional incentives, and the 'dangerous … capacity to confer legitimacy and prestige afforded by collaboration with state actors',[75] the stakes, for Toros, are too high to refuse engagement with political elites whose plurality and porosity may offer more opportunities for intervention than often assumed. In Marie Breen-Smyth's stark warning, similarly, 'critical scholars cannot complain about government policy on terrorism if they have not attempted to inform that policy'.[76]

The case for capitalising on contemporary opportunities for greater policy engagement may benefit, too, from conceptual and historical buttressing. Conceptually, we might draw upon critical theoretical resources to question, blur, or even reject the theory/practice distinction around which discussions such as this are typically organised. As Pinar Bilgin succinctly puts it in another context, the distinction between practical, policy-relevant work and abstract theorising begins to break down when we recognise that 'all practice is informed by theory and theory itself is a form of practice'.[77] For Ken Booth,[78] similarly, 'scholars who study security, whether they recognise it or not, have a direct relationship with the real world conditions of relative insecurity or security; their ideas can contribute to replicating or changing people's conditions of existence in specific situations'. Approached thus, the inventions of critical scholars are *already* situated – even complicit – in the 'real world' of security politics irrespective of whether this is acknowledged or wanted.[79] A posture of simply 'peering down on the world'[80] from an untainted critical Archimedean viewpoint is, therefore, either disingenuous or naive. Given the starkness of this warning, contemporary critical scholars of (counter)terrorism might take comfort from the long-standing pursuit of policy influence amongst critical security scholars with their ambitions for progressive political change. As Hynek and Chandler argue of the 1990s:

> For many leading critical security scholars, work with leading Western powers and international institutions was the emancipatory way forward. … In fact, there were very few successful critical security academics who did not participate in policy advocacy, especially in the Canadian, Japanese and UN contexts.[81]

One might, indeed, go further still and approach the contemporary critical reticence toward policy engagement as a reversal of the historical imbrication between critical scholarship and advocacy; an imbrication that attracted censure from more 'traditional' forms of security theorising with their quest for detached, objective knowledge.[82]

[73]Harmonie Toros, 'Dialogue, praxis and the state: A response to Richard Jackson', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 126–30.

[74]Jackson, 'To be or not to be'.

[75]Harmonie Toros, 'Critical theory and terrorism studies', in Richard Jackson (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 70–9 (p. 78).

[76]Marie Breen-Smyth, 'Subjectivities, "suspect communities", governments, and the ethics of research on "terrorism"', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 194–215 (p. 213).

[77]Pinar Bilgin, 'Theory/practice in critical approaches to security: An opening for dialogue?', *International Politics*, 38:2 (2001), pp. 273–82 (p. 274).

[78]Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 198.

[79]See Laura Sjoberg, 'Calibrating violences in critical terrorism studies', in Alice E. Finden, Carlos Yebra López, Tarela Ike, Ugo Gaudino, and Samwel Oando (eds), *Methodologies in Critical Terrorism Studies: Gaps and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), pp. 15–28.

[80]Solomon and Steele, cited in Michael Livesey, 'To look for another thing, and in another way: Revitalising criticality with multimodal methodologies', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2024), pp. 1–27 (p. 11), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2370612}.

[81]Nik Hynek and David Chandler, 'No emancipatory alternative, no critical security studies', *Critical Studies on Security*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 46–63 (p. 51).

[82]Johan Eriksson, 'Observers or advocates? On the political role of security analysts. Cooperation and conflict', 34:3 (1999), pp. 311–30 (pp. 312–14).

A newly invigorated critical terrorism scholarship of the sort adverted to here would, therefore, seek to capitalise on emerging synergies of interests and ideas by championing progressive policy prescriptions to powerful states and their actors. If a 'mainstream' appetite to move beyond the harmful counterterrorism practices of the post-9/11 period truly exists, attention might be given to more persuasively articulated engagements expressed in a style and manner appropriate to policy audiences, not least because 'the state' constitutes a variegated and complex terrain with varied, cross-cutting, and (sometimes) competing interests and agendas.[83] Should 'the state' prove a step too far, there are multiple NGOs and other civil society organisations with whom critical scholars might also engage here. Distance and/or proximity to power may shape both the nature of such interactions, the significance and reach of such, as well as diverse issues such as the (in)ability to be sincerely heard and the palatability of engagement to individual researchers.[84]

The success of contemporary efforts at 'critical policy advocacy'[85] in relation to (counter)terrorism will depend upon internal and external factors: on scholars' willingness and capacity to navigate diverse fields of counterterrorism professionals, on the one hand, and, indeed, on the intent, diffusion, and permanence of the new appetite for less deleterious forms of counterterrorism. There are, though, already important initiatives to which we might point here. Lindahl, for instance, offers a critical model of counterterrorism as an explicit 'guide' for policymakers, drawing on lessons from the Norwegian experience.[86] Less explicit, but as important, are depictions of critical terrorism scholarship as an exercise in 'speaking truth to power' that involves confronting the falsehoods, injustices, and violences of authoritative actors in the counterterrorism space. Jarvis and Lister see citizens participating in focus groups on counterterrorism policy, for instance, as potentially significant interlocutors with scope for intervening in established forms of security politics.[87] Martini and Silva's call for greater critical engagement with counter-extremism policies targeting the far right is predicated on a related view of such scholarship as well positioned to do so precisely because of its long-standing engagement with the consequences of hasty, ill-considered, and deleterious security initiatives.[88] And, for McGowan, similarly, the critical attentiveness to discursive power and the complexity of subject positions such as 'victimhood' renders it uniquely well positioned 'to enrich policy discussions relating to terrorism both within and outside of government by engaging with victims'.[89]

Continue?

A strategy of capitalising on the rhetorical and political opportunities provided by contemporary 'mainstream' dissatisfaction with the war on terror relies upon two leaps of faith that might be unsatisfactory to critical scholars. First is that the contemporary discrediting of the 'war on terror' is as genuine, thorough, and far-reaching for 'mainstream' policymakers and commentators as it is (or has been) for critical scholars. It might be the case, for instance, that superficial similarities between these two 'camps'[90] obscure rather more profound differences. One such difference, as we have seen, concerns the 'war on terror's' social and political reach, and the fear that contemporary

[83] See, e.g., Ruth Blakeley, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North in the South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Bob Jessop, 'Redesigning the state, reorienting state power, and rethinking the state', in Kevin T. Leicht and J. Craig Jenkins (eds), *Handbook of Politics: State and Society in Global Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 41–62; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2003), p. xiv.

[84] See Dixit, this issue, on abolitionism.

[85] Hynek and Chandler, 'No emancipatory alternative', p. 49.

[86] Lindahl, 'A CTS model'.

[87] Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, 'What would you do? Everyday conceptions and constructions of counter-terrorism', *Politics*, 36:3 (2016), pp. 277–91. See also Jarvis, 'Terrorism, counter-terrorism', p. 348.

[88] Alice Martini and Raquel da Silva, 'Editors' introduction: Critical terrorism studies and the far-right: New and (re)new(ed) challenges ahead?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), pp. 1–12 (pp. 2–3).

[89] Will McGowan, 'Critical terrorism studies, victimisation, and policy relevance: Compromising politics or challenging hegemony?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 12–32 (p. 27).

[90] Christine Sylvester, 'Anatomy of a footnote', *Security Dialogue*, 38:4 (2007), pp. 547–58 (p. 556).

discrediting of, say, the costly and counterproductive war in Afghanistan does not extend to this paradigm's far more expansive reach and normalisation. Such normalisation includes, *inter alia*, the continuing harm to human life due to infrastructural destruction, disease, refugeeism, and beyond in the war on terror's primary theatres including Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen;[91] the entrenchment of ostensibly exceptional legal powers; the international institutionalisation of far-reaching counter-radicalisation programmes and initiatives; the legitimisation of new military techniques and technologies including the use of unmanned aerial vehicles for counterterrorism purposes; the large-scale erosion of human rights protections and norms internationally, including around the illegality of torture; and the pervasiveness of colonial, racist, and/or Islamophobic sentiment and measures. Perhaps most vivid here at the time of writing is the continuing violence and devastation in Gaza, which alone points to the continuing appeal of military responses to 'terrorism' and the willingness to justify widespread civilian insecurity and loss of life in responding to this threat.[92] More broadly, as noted above, while some policy contiguities can be observed between critical terrorism and security scholarship and (particularly following the fall of Kabul) mainstream discourses on (counter)terrorism, important colonial underpinnings of (counter)terrorism remain.[93] Terrorism, here, is still approached as an issue of 'us' versus 'them'. Indeed, one might argue that the desire to exteriorise and outsource kinetic operations, and to focus more deeply on ideological divides, only serves to further entrench such binaries.

Related to this, we might extend this discussion of normalisation to ask whether the contemporary condemnation of selected parts of the war on terror is one of utility rather than principle. Returning to the article's opening section, greatest concern with this paradigm and its consequences remains reserved for those components of the war on terror in which 'we' – Western states and their citizens – bear the costs of decisions and actions. Such costs may be financial, reputational, human, or other, but it is their distribution rather than existence that is most problematic within mainstream circles. Might the primary targeting of internal or external others be why we have seen rather less appetite for addressing the violences of, say, counter-extremism strategies or drone programmes, than we have for increasingly unpopular, seemingly unwinnable, military adventures abroad?[94]

This leads us on to the second leap of faith required for a strategy of capitalisation which pertains to the motivations and means of mainstream discourse on, and retrenchment of, the war on terror. Although critical security/terrorism scholarship has always been a broad umbrella, most work therein shares a broad commitment to progressivist political ambitions. At the more universalist end, we find this articulated around a faith in emancipation.[95] Elsewhere, we find a determination to render visible overlooked or hidden forms of harm and violence.[96] Notwithstanding important differences between these critical scholarships,[97] the importance of such commitments means that a contemporary congruity of desired *ends* with mainstream policy and commentary is likely insufficient to mask potential incongruities of *motive and means*. Greater engagement with policy audiences for short-term, opportunistic reasons, therefore, may be seen as politically unwise or morally unsound. Far worse, it might also be deemed mere political expedience – a product of bandwagoning with sites of power where the personal and professional stakes of doing so are

[91] See Stephanie Savell, 'How death outlives war: The reverberating impact of the post-9/11 wars on human health', *Costs of War Project* (2023), available at: {https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2023/Indirect%20Deaths.pdf}.

[92] See Toros et al., this issue.

[93] Rabea M. Khan, 'The coloniality of the religious terrorism thesis', *Review of International Studies* (2023), pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000517.

[94] Anna Shortridge, 'The U.S. war in Afghanistan twenty years on: Public opinion then and now, Council on Foreign Relations' (7 October 2021), available at: {https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-war-afghanistan-twenty-years-public-opinion-then-and-now}.

[95] E.g. Booth, *Theory of World Security*.

[96] E.g. Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

[97] See, among others, Beate Jahn, 'Critical theory in crisis? A reconsideration', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:4 (2021), pp. 1274–99.

comparatively low, perhaps because of the backward-facing gaze of contemporary convergences on violences that appear now past, as with the war in Afghanistan.

If these two leaps of faith – (i) thoroughness, and (ii) congruity of motivation and means – appear rather a lot for critical scholars, an alternative to capitalisation might therefore be for such work to continue on as before. If even some of the war on terror's harms – human, racialised, financial, and so on – continue unabated, then refusing to centre these within our critical scholarship might be complacent, even negligent. Just as earlier work cautioned against prematurely celebrating the move from Bush to Obama,[98] so might we today caution against early celebration of the contemporary juncture. Indeed, perhaps it is now even *more* urgent that critical scholars continue to contest, discredit, and deconstruct the war on terror's assumptions and impacts if that paradigm's normalisation means that so much of the post-9/11 architecture now goes unnoticed. Critique, here, might be thought of, therefore, as an ongoing, never-ending dynamic: as a process, perhaps, not a destination.[99] And, as noted above, the scale of destruction wrought in Gaza since the 7 October 2023 attack alone presses home the levels and extent of violence which continues to be wrought in the name of (counter)terrorism ostensibly beyond the rubric of the 'war on terror'.

Criticalise?

A third option might be for relevant critical scholarship to use contemporary moments of convergence as an opportunity to more thoroughly divert its gaze away from the trappings of the post-9/11 'war on terror'. Recent work in this area has pulled attention to the continuing – and often problematic – pull of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath on scholarship, arguing that we might, finally, try to 'forget 9/11'[100] and reorient our focus to other events, other violences. At play here is the ambiguous relationship between those attacks and the critical literatures they helped bring into being; critical literatures with parallel, but contradictory, ambitions to *both* de-exceptionalise 9/11 vis-à-vis other forms of violence, *while also* refusing to ignore the horrors brought on by the response of the Bush administration and its allies.[101] Thus, if policymakers and 'mainstream' commentators have taken up some of this work in highlighting the war on terror's shortcomings, perhaps other targets now merit the attention of critical scholarship.

The obvious question that follows, of course, is towards *what* should critical scholarship redivert its gaze, if this involves setting aside the counterterrorism discourse and policy of the world's most powerful states? The most obvious response – and one already emerging within the field – is that it might turn its attention inwards and focus on the biases, assumptions, and exclusions of projects like critical terrorism studies. Such a claim is apparent, most obviously, in work calling for decolonising critical terrorism research – notwithstanding differences in what this might mean and how it might proceed.[102] Mohammed's recent intervention, for instance, highlights the lack of attention to coloniality, or experiences of colonial difference, within terrorism scholarship, and the socio-institutional academic frameworks that perpetuate these silences.[103] Critical terrorism studies (CTS), in this analysis, has been as guilty as more mainstream approaches to terrorism research, meaning that it risks reproducing the epistemic and political violences it has long made an effort to critique. Rabea Khan goes further still, arguing that CTS' emergence in response to 9/11

[98] E.g. Stephens, 'Beyond imaginative geographies?'; McCrisken, 'Ten years on'.

[99] Booth, *Theory of World Security*, p. 467.

[100] James Fitzgerald, 'Forget 9/11', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 494–7; see also Harmonie Toros, '"9/11 is alive and well" or how critical terrorism studies has sustained the 9/11 narrative', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:2, (2017), pp. 203–19.

[101] Leonie Jackson, Harmonie Toros, and Lee Jarvis, 'Editors' introduction: What place for 9/11 in critical terrorism studies?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 397–9.

[102] Meera Sabaratnam, 'IR in dialogue … but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 781–803.

[103] Ilyas Mohammed, 'Decolonialisation and the terrorism industry', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:2 (2022), pp. 417–40. See also Khan, 'Coloniality'.

and the war on terror inextricably tied it to those events, leading, among other things, to its unintentional reproduction of Islam's connection to terrorism.[104] Embracing post-colonial thinking, as Chukwuma notes, may therefore facilitate 'alternative vocabularies for explaining both terrorism and counter-terrorism in different contexts', in the process helping to broaden 'the purview of terrorism research beyond the threats facing western countries … including colonial and/or imperialist violence'.[105]

Recent interventions into the foundational political, normative, or methodological commitments of critical terrorism research offer related efforts to redirect its critical energy and purposes, including appeals to a greater grappling with silence[106] and numbers,[107] as a way to escape the field's enduring logocentrism. Such work is valuable because it facilitates bridge-building with other scholarships and their expertises,[108] at the same time as it forces academic and political attention upon hitherto-overlooked issues, regions, or conceptual concerns. Recent engagements with whiteness and white supremacy by critical terrorism scholars,[109] for instance, offer a particularly powerful example of how a recasting of attention can radically shift that which is to be taken seriously as a focus of research.

The temporary rapprochement – if that is what it is – between critical scholarship and traditional (counter)terrorism knowledge may therefore provide time and space (perhaps already is providing time and space) for a 'second order critique' of critical scholarship itself. There is, of course, the danger of such a 'turn inwards' being seen as a form of academic self-indulgence – of focusing on internal academic parameters and boundaries, rather than the global harms which continue to be wrought under the auspices of preventing terrorism. Yet such a critique would fail to recognise the inherently productive nature of (critical terrorism) knowledge, seeking to expose its political functions and ideological consequences for (counter)terrorism scholarship and practice.[110] Therefore, while the immediate focus on attention may shift from direct practices of harm being perpetrated, doing so may enable CTS to identify forms of harms, discrimination, and silencing which have hitherto been ignored.

Conclusion

The palatability of the three strategies sketched in this article will depend on several factors. First is an assessment of the nature and extent of contiguity between mainstream discourse on (counter)terrorism and critical terrorism research. As noted above, it is possible to see shifts in mainstream discourse as significant, reflecting a genuine and thoroughgoing reappraisal of how (Western) states should go about addressing political violence and terrorism. Alternatively, one may read these as more pragmatic, more 'tactical': as representing a desire to limit and reduce the costs of the war on terror, and/or to outsource these to others. Such 'tactical' shifts, moreover, may

[104] Khan, 'Race, coloniality and the post 9/11 counter-discourse'; Khan, 'Coloniality of the religious terrorism thesis'.

[105] Kodili H. Chukwuma, 'Critical terrorism studies and postcolonialism: Constructing ungoverned spaces in counter-terrorism discourse in Nigeria', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:2 (2022), pp. 399–416 (p. 412).

[106] Alice Martini and Elisabeth Schweiger, 'Can CTS listen? Silences in terrorism and counterterrorism', in Alice Martini and Raquel da Silva (eds), *Contemporary Reflections on Critical Terrorism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), pp. 142–57.

[107] Jessica Auchter, 'Counting the dead: CTS and the politics of dead bodies', in Alice Martini and Raquel da Silva (eds), *Contemporary Reflections on Critical Terrorism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), pp. 107–23.

[108] See Lee Jarvis and Nick Robinson, 'Oh help! Oh no! The international politics of *The Gruffalo*: Children's picturebooks and world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 50:1 (2023), pp. 58–78.

[109] Priya Dixit and Kathryn Miller, 'Erasing historical violence from the study of violent extremism: Memorialization of white supremacy at Stone Mountain, United States', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), pp. 61–82; Alice Martini, 'Global silences as privilege: The international community's white silence on far-right terrorism', *Security Dialogue* 54:3 (2023), pp. 252–71; Jacque Micieli-Voutsinas and Nicole Nguyen, 'Editors' introduction: White supremacy in the age of (counter-)terror', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 16:1 (2023), pp. 146–51.

[110] Richard Jackson, 'Knowledge, power and politics in the study of political terrorism', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 66–83 (p. 77).

mask ongoing colonial, Orientalist dispositions and worldviews which underpinned the war on terror in its original phase.

Another way of thinking about this is by recentring the question implicit in this special issue as a whole: 'Is the war on terror (actually) over?' Such a question, of course, pre-supposes that the war on terror ever *began* – a position which risks overlooking the endurance of colonial violence to global politics pre- and post-9/11. As Said notes, there is the question of 'whether modern imperialism ever ended, or whether it has continued in the Orient since Napoleon's entry into Egypt two centuries ago'.[111] In so doing, he draws attention to the positionality of assessments of the 'war on terror' which will inevitably vary depending upon where in the world one sits.[112] Under this kind of view, perhaps we are currently witnessing something more like a reordering of the world's pieces, rather than anything more thoroughgoing. Indeed, scholars have already identified the dangers of excessive focus on the dramatic aspects of the war on terror, precisely because it risks ignoring the more routine and mundane reproduction of deep-rooted colonial logics. 'It is important not to allow the spectacular violence of September 11, or the wars in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, to blind us to the *banality* of the colonial present and to our complicity in its horrors.'[113] Or to put this slightly differently, just because the most obvious, most graphic manifestations of the war on terror have failed – *and, as we have seen, are widely seen to have failed* – both in their stated aims (reducing terrorism, providing stability, and so on) and in terms of the wider suffering and harms they have wrought, does not mean that the Orientalist framings which informed and allowed such violences in the first place have gone away. Indeed, as suggested above, the ongoing violence in Gaza provides a forceful rebuttal to any such complacency. Yet it is, as Closs Stephens notes, one thing to note the presence of such binaries, but an altogether different – and more exacting – challenge to move beyond them.[114]

Thinking about the war on terror's (potential) 'ending' raises the question of what this might look like. Linking to the discussion above, connecting the war on terror to colonial framings and dynamics, is such an ending even possible? Ó Tuathail questions whether binaries of West/East, civilised/barbarian are enduring, perhaps permanent, features of human, or at least Western, civilisation.[115] Seen thus, could colonialism/the war on terror ever be said to end? And indeed, given the vast socio-political architectures instantiated under the war on terror (in areas including law, security regimes, political discourse, popular culture, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) programmes, policing, military governance, surveillance, intelligence-sharing, technology, and so on), could this ever be said to have disappeared? In other words, what would 'the end' of the war on terror look like? Would an 'ending' mean there are no new initiatives in the war on terror – no *new* kinetic campaigns, *new* legal interventions, *new* institutional arrangements? Or would an end to the war on terror require a complete dismantling of the post-2001 security apparatus? Is this even possible? Even if some of the institutional frameworks could be dismantled, discursive repertoires which have shifted and changed the realm of the possible cannot be undone. Guantanamo Bay could be closed, but the harms wrought to individuals, to legal norms, and so on remain an indelible mark on the historical record. These questions loom large when thinking about the future of critical thinking around terrorism and security more widely. The possible futures which can be imagined – which links to perceptions of what remains of, what has 'gone' from the war on terror – as well as what an 'end' to the war on terror might look like, likely shape what critical scholars think should come now.[116]

[111] Said, *Orientalism*, p. xiv.
[112] See also Chang and Jenn, and Oando, this issue.
[113] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, p. 16.
[114] Stephens, 'Beyond imaginative geographies'.
[115] Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Book forum: Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present*', *Political Geography*, 27:3 (2008), pp. 339–43.
[116] See Dixit, this issue.

A further issue of importance here is the perception of academic agency, and belief in the power of scholars and scholarship to enact meaningful political change. Attempting to capitalise on opportunities opened in the contemporary critique of the war on terror – pursuing the first strategy outlined above – only makes sense if political structures and interests are deemed amenable to change. Relevant, here, are perceptions of the nature and essence of critique, and the tightness with which this is grasped as an orienting or foundational principle. Put crudely: is the 'critical' in critical security/terrorism scholarship an identity and therefore indicative of who 'we' are (and, by implication, of course, who 'we' are not)? Or is the critical something more akin to a verb – something 'we' do? Evolving, repackaging, or even discarding 'criticality' for pragmatic purposes will, of course, be more traumatic for those attracted to the former than the latter.

Although long-standing in security and International Relations scholarship, such questions around the nature, meaning, and purpose of critique have become increasingly prominent in recent years.[117] This discussion has been important, in part, because it has helped refocus attention on the relationship between critique and alternativity, and the extent to which critical projects have a responsibility to develop and share policy solutions to contemporary problems. In one recent overview, for instance, Visoka draws on peace and conflict research to distinguish three modes of critique: critique-without-alternative, associated with deconstructive thought; overtly emancipatory forms of critique-as-alternative that pull back from proffering prescriptive policy solutions; and the explicitly problem-solving orientation associated with the critique-with-alternative approach that seeks to 'fix' the institutions and dynamics of contemporary world politics.[118] Such typologies reignite the long-standing question of whether critical (security/terrorism) scholarship should have reconstructive as well as deconstructive purpose.[119] This is important, because although typically associated with Frankfurt School-inspired critical theorising,[120] critical terrorism studies, for instance, has always encompassed critical strategies rooted within feminist, post-structural, and other scholarship more sceptical of emancipatory ambitions and their Enlightenment roots.[121] Such internal tensions have value because the vibrancy and movement they introduce help to combat metatheoretical ossification and – worse – political conservatism which would surely witness this work's death knell. Questions around what it is for which we should strive have implications, in turn, for how we evaluate the success or failure of critical scholarship:[122] is the (belated) acceptance of critical terrorism arguments indicative of the former or the latter?

As this all indicates, it has become increasingly commonplace to ask what critical approaches (can or should) do to world politics. Such discussions are vitally important not least because they are at once ontological, normative, and fundamentally political, forcing confrontation with our aspirations and expectations about the reality, desirability, and feasibility of meaningful change. As evident above, our concern in this article has been to reverse this question and enquire into the implications of changes in world politics *upon* critical approaches, with particular reference to the contemporary politics of (counter)terrorism.

[117]E.g. Cox, 'Social forces'; Andrew Linklater, 'The question of the next stage in International Relations theory: A critical-theoretical point of view', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21:1 (1992), pp. 77–98.

[118]Gëzim Visoka, 'Critique and alternativity in International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 21:4 (2019), pp. 678–704.

[119]See also Davide Schmid, 'The poverty of critical theory in International Relations: Habermas, Linklater and the failings of cosmopolitan critique', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:1 (2018), pp. 198–220; Philip R. Conway, 'Critical international politics at an impasse: Reflexivist, reformist, reactionary, and restitutive post-critique', *International Politics Reviews*, 9:1 (2021), pp. 213–38.

[120]E.g. Harmonie Toros and Jeroen Gunning, 'Exploring a critical theory approach to terrorism studies', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 87–108; Matt McDonald, 'Emancipation and critical terrorism studies', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 109–23.

[121]E.g. Lee Jarvis, 'The spaces and faces of critical terrorism studies', *Security Dialogue*, 40:1 (2009), pp. 5–27; Jarvis, 'Terrorism, counter-terrorism'.

[122]See J. Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg, 'The queer art of failed IR?', *Alternatives*, 45:4 (2020), pp. 167–83.

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