MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

**Max Planck Institute
for Social Anthropology**

Report 2014 – 2016

**Max Planck Research Group
'How 'Terrorists' Learn'**

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'How 'Terrorists' Learn –
Re-considering the tactical and strategic transformation
of violent movements and organisations'

edited by Carolin Görzig

Halle/Saale

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Max Planck Research Group 'How 'Terrorists' Learn – Re-considering the tactical and strategic transformation of violent movements and organisations'

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From Learning to Unlearning

Carolin Görzig

As Günther Schlee writes in his article 'How terrorists are made': "Understanding something and forgiving it are two entirely different kettles of fish."[1] Field research on terrorism challenges the researcher to understand his or her research subject without condoning violence. Such research comes along with ethical challenges especially when the (il-)legitimacy of the research subject is so contested. Since the Robin Hoods of our past are the terrorists of today, as Jack Goody argues,[2] field research becomes a challenge to the researcher's normative agenda. This project departs from the assumption that such challenges should not keep us from researching present (and historical) social phenomena.

When conducting interviews during my own doctoral studies a couple of years ago, it was noteworthy that many of the interview subjects liked to express themselves in metaphors: while Islamists in Egypt describe their struggle as "knocking on doors", Kurds emphasise that they have "no nose, mouth, or eyes". And while Colombian guerrillas like to talk of "windows of opportunity", Hamas members stress that they have "no space, no room and that their house is occupied". What these metaphors have in common is that they refer to doors, rooms, and windows. Clearly, offering rooms of communication and opening doors and windows of opportunity is a language expressive of hopes and desires to talk and to be heard. These hopes are often frustrated by limited possibilities of expression.[3] Metaphors and analogies help the researcher to learn and understand how the interview subject makes sense of the world. In the following, the framework of the Research Group is presented – a framework that demonstrates our conceptual analogies when approaching the topic of how 'terrorists' learn.

A prime motivation for terrorist learning that constitutes a recurring theme in the terrorism literature is survival: "The terrorist campaign is like a shark in the water: it must keep moving forward – no matter how slowly or incrementally – or die."[4] Nevertheless "surprisingly little work has been done thus far on the topic", as Adam Dolnik notes.[5] Yet, terrorist learning has always been an element in the terrorism literature, much of which, however, has been focused on the debate over whether terrorist movements are innovative or non-innovative.[6] The literature on

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[1] Schlee, Günther. 2014. *How terrorists are made*. Research outlook. Annual Report 2014 of the Max Planck Society, p. 23.

[2] Goody, Jack. 2002. What is a terrorist. *History and Anthropology* 13(2): 139–143.

[3] Görzig, Carolin. 2012. *Talking to terrorists.* London, New York: Routledge.

[4] Hoffman, Bruce. 2006. *Inside terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 234.

[5] Dolnik, Adam. 2007. *Understanding terrorist innovation: technology, tactics and global trends*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 10.

[6] Jackson, Brian. 2004. *Organizational learning and terrorist groups*. Working Paper. RAND Corporation, p. 4.

terrorist learning thereby shares with the general literature on organisational learning its focus on the question of whether organisations are able to learn. In contrast, this Research Group addresses the question of 'how' terrorists learn. Before delving into the elements of the group's research framework, some definitional questions need to be clarified.

Jack S. Levy defined learning as a "change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience."[7] Perceiving learning as an action which can end without a visible result, he states that learning can induce action such like policy change, but policy change is not necessary for learning to have taken place. This leads us to ask how we can conclude that an action was the result of learning and how we can make learning processes observable. Without qualitative research and in-depth interviews such observation cannot be possible. Despite the challenges of field research on terrorism, group members will conduct field research in order to fill this gap.

Sources of Learning

While most of the literature about learning focuses on the individual learning process, Kettle and Mumford stress the importance of including every level of learning in concepts of terrorist learning: "the individual, the group, generations and organizations."[8] Those levels have to be seen as overlapping and interacting spheres because of the interdependence of learners.[9] According to Levy, organisational learning always happens through individuals.[10] This does not necessarily limit learning to being a top-down process in organisations but also includes bottom-up learning as well. The distinction of learning processes into top-down and bottom-up processes is mirrored in the distinction between followers and leaders, a distinction taken up in different ways in the individual projects of the Research Group. Almakan Orozobekova, for example, analyses recruitment by decision-makers (top-down) and the corresponding radicalisation of foreign fighters who are recruited (bottom-up).

Literature about organisational learning often has an "emphasis upon the impact of the systems, structures, resources and influences of the organization that reframes individual learning in order to achieve the organizational objectives."[11] André Bank and Mirjam Edel also examine more precisely how individuals influence learning

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[7] Levy, Jack S. 1994. Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield. *International Organization* 48: 283. We acknowledge Stefan Schmid for his supporting research.

[8] Kettle, Louise and Andrew Mumford. 2016. Terrorist learning: a new analytical framework. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*: 1–16. Accepted Manuscript. Print, p. 5.

[9] Ibid., p. 16.

[10] Levy, Jack S. 1994. Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield. *International Organization* 48(2): 279–312. Print, p. 287.

[11] Kettle, Louise and Andrew Mumford. Terrorist learning: a new analytical framework. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016): 1–16. Accepted Manuscript. Print, p. 8.

processes within organisations.[12] A PhD student in the Research Group, Katharina Siebert, investigates decision-making processes within violent organisations in the context of the adoption of suicide bombings, peering inside the black box of organisations.

The determinants of organisational learning predominantly reflect dynamics within terrorist organisations. However, learning does not occur in a vacuum. This project fills the gap by conducting a systematic analysis of the context of terrorist learning. The notion of social learning provides an applicable conceptual tool for contextual analysis. As Albert Bandura states, "[d]evelopments in learning theory shifted the focus of causal analysis from hypothesized inner determinants to detailed examination of external influences on responsiveness."[13] According to Albert Bandura, learning occurs through experience or through the observation of others' behaviour.[14] While social learning has especially been applied to the study of individuals, social movement theory provides an analysis of collective movements that equally brings the context into focus. As Jeroen Gunning notes, "[t]he overall result [of applying social movement theory to the study of terrorism] is that terrorist violence is de-exceptionalised, taken out of its sterile box of sui generis phenomena, and returned to its living context."[15]

Among the authors who have applied social movement theory to the study of political violence, Donatella Della Porta argues that understanding radical political movements requires analysing the micro, meso, and macro levels.[16] This project complements the literature on terrorist learning by providing a systematic analysis of the context of terrorist learning at these three levels. The micro level serves to look at the context of the terrorist movement itself as epitomised by an organisation's analysis of its own past experiences, its scrutiny of successes and failures. The meso level, referring to relationships with other terrorist movements, is equally decisive for terrorist learning as observed by Michael Horowitz: "(…) sometimes technical expertise is not enough to adopt an innovation. Even though Al Qaeda had money, committed members, and weapons, it needed to send its members to Hezbollah, a suicide terrorism innovator, to pick up the tacit knowledge necessary to conduct its own suicide operations."[17] Finally, the adaptation of terrorist organisations to

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[12] Bank, André and Mirjam Edel. 2015. *Authoritarian regime learning: comparative insights from the Arab uprisings*. Working Paper No. 274. GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

[13] Bandura, Albert. 1977. *Social learning theory.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. For a political science perspective on social learning see: Haas, Ernst B. 1980. Why collaborate? Issue-linkage and international regimes. *World Politics* 32(3): 357–405.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gunning, Jeroen. Social movement theory and the study of terrorism. In: Richard Jackson et al. (eds.). *Critical Terrorism Studies*: 162.

[16] Della Porta, Donatella. 2006. *Social movements, political violence, and the state. A comparative analysis of Italy and Germany.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[17] Horowitz, Michael C. 2010. *The diffusion of military power: causes and consequences for international politics*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, p. 166.

counter-terrorism measures exemplifies processes at the macro level. While hitherto studies have problematised relationships among terrorist organisations[18] as well as the terrorism-counter-terrorism conundrum, they have rarely focused on terrorist learning.

Processes of Learning

Most of the few studies which take up this theme tend to focus either on the motivation for terrorist learning or on the outcome thereof. Increasing lethality, boosting public support, and guaranteeing resilience and survival stand out among the motivations studied. While clearly interrelated with motivations for terrorist learning, an emphasis on outcomes can equally be observed in the literature. Respective studies discuss the diffusion and escalation of violence.

In contrast, this project addresses the process of terrorist learning. It achieves this by understanding terrorist learning as enabled by context, asking the question of learning from what or from whom. Thereby, two processes of learning in context are preliminarily distinguished: competition and emulation. Several scholars have argued that the behaviour of terrorist groups is influenced by cooperation or competition with other terrorist groups.[19] Adam Dolnik, for example, elaborates: "[I]n the event of cooperation, know-how and technology transfers from one group to another can take place, contributing to a group's ability to perform a seemingly sudden capability leap. In contrast, the rivalry among groups operating in the same theater can result in a fierce competition that will drive each group to improve in order to demonstrate superiority over its rival."[20] In fact, competition and emulation can occur at all three contextual levels which the research project seeks to address: doing things better than during past mistakes[21] or emulating past successes[22] at the micro level, competing with or emulating other terrorist groups at the meso level, and fighting with or being sponsored by states at the macro level.

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[18] See for example: Karmon, Ely. 2005. *Coalitions between terrorist organizations: revolutionaries, nationalists and Islamists.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

[19] See for example: DeNardo, James. 1985. *Power in numbers: the political strategy of protest and rebellion.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 267 ff.

[20] Dolnik, Adam. 2007. *Understanding terrorist innovation*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 18. See also: Phillips, Brian J. 2014. Enemies with benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity. *Journal of Peace Research* 52(1): 62–75.

[21] Negative learning.

[22] Positive learning.

Outcomes of Learning

Learning can be behavioural but also cognitive. According to William H. Starbuck and Bo Hedberg, theorists of the behavioural approach try to explain learning as "automatic reactions to performance feedback", in which conscious thought has only a weak effect. Because those reactions are only automatic, originally new behaviour cannot be explained by this theory.[23] In contrast to behavioural learning, cognitive learning stands out in the fact that it is decision-based: "Learners' mental processes integrate and interpret perceptions, analyse situations, and propose alternative behaviors."[24] In terrorist organisations, different roles such as follower or leader are viewed as aligned with different learning processes. Almakan Orozobekova will investigate, among others, the family roles by individuals who have become foreign fighters conducting interviews with corresponding families.[25] Such interviews can illuminate the question of how these individuals learned their roles and at which step in the process cognitive learning was involved or whether they were instead directed from top-down. Katharina Siebert, in turn, argues in her PhD thesis that the adoption or rejection of suicide bombings is not an automatic reaction to environmental influences but the result of rational decisions based on the collective consciousness of an organisation. When analysing learning processes of collective movements, the distinction between simple learning that leads to a change in means and complex learning that leads to a change in ends can be drawn.[26] Much of the work on terrorist learning has employed an instrumental understanding of terrorists' evolution, problematising tactical learning. Conclusively, various authors are preoccupied with the increasing lethality of terrorist attacks as a result of terrorist innovations. The so-called 'new' terrorism or religious terrorism is frequently correlated with more lethal and catastrophic attacks. The adoption of suicide terrorism has especially gained widespread attention in the literature after the attacks of September 11, 2001. However, terrorism had undergone transformations well before that. In addition to the focus on the tactical level of terrorist learning, research within the frame of social network analysis has been applied to the study of the evolution of terrorist groups. According to this research on the operational learning of terrorist organisations, network forms have spread as the dominant structure of terrorist movements.[27] The transnationalisation of Al Qaeda serves as a prime example of

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[23] Starbuck, William H. and Bo Hedberg. 2015. How organizations learn from success and failure. In: Meinolf Dierkes et al. (eds.). *Handbook of Organizational Learning & Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at SSRN 2708267. Print, p. 4.

[24] Ibid., p. 8.

[25] She complements the research of bottom-up processes with the analysis of top-down recruitment processes.

[26] Simmons, Beth A., Frank Dobbin and Geoffrey Garrett. 2006. Introduction: the international diffusion of liberalism. *International Organization* 60: 781–810.

[27] See: Arquilla, John and David Ronfeldt. 2001. *Network and netwars: the future of terror, crime and militancy*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

the organisational transformation of the terrorist landscape.[28] From nodes, cells and hubs[29] to dark networks,[30] the social network analysis of terrorist organisations problematises complexity. This increasing complexity of terrorist structures has been understood as an adaptation of terrorist movements to counter-terrorism measures motivated by the need for survival.

In addition to tactical and operational learning this project is designed to include the analysis of strategic learning. Strategic learning is understood here as involving the adaptation of political ends. The project hence goes beyond simple learning in terms of changing means and problematises complex learning in terms of changing ends. The following graph visualises the conceptual framework of the Research Group with sources of learning (on the left), mechanisms of learning (in the middle) and outcomes of learning (on the right):

competition

macro — — strategic

meso — — operational

micro — — tactical

emulation
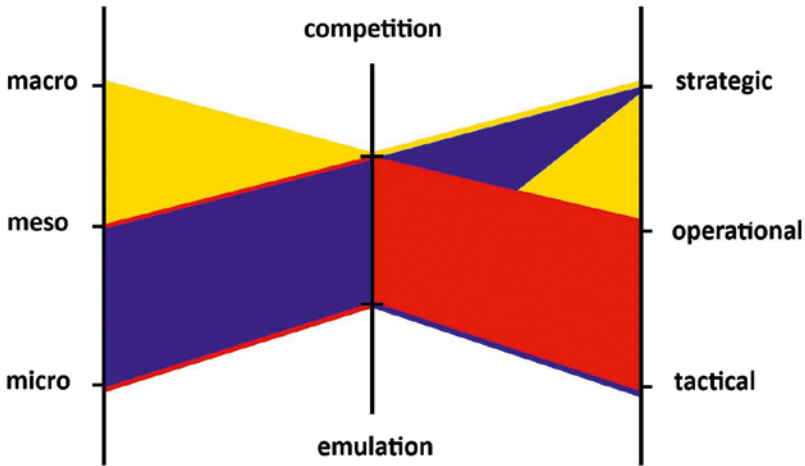
The coloured components in the graph visualise the different projects of the Research Group.

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[28] See for example: Borum, Randy and Michael Gelles. 2005. Al-Qaeda's operational evolution: behavioral and organizational perspectives. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 23: 467–483.

[29] Krebs, Valdis E. 2002. Mapping networks of terrorist cells. *Connections* 24(3): 43–52.

[30] See: Raab, Jörg and Brinton H. Milward. 2003. Dark networks as problems. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13(4): 413–439.

There are multiple overlaps between the Research Group and the Department 'Integration and Conflict'. The Research Group goes beyond an instrumental understanding and departs from the assumption that strategic and tactical learning also involve a change in the character of terrorist groups, frequently a change in identity. By investigating tactical as well as strategic learning it connects rational choice assumptions and the analysis of identity change processes, consistent with the research at the Department 'Integration and Conflict'. PhD student Regine Schwab, for example, departs from the assumption that the Syrian insurgency is the result of grievances as well as greed. The Research Group furthermore shares with the Department 'Integration and Conflict' the focus on shifting alliances by looking at external influences on learning processes, for example at the meso level. Terrorist groups collaborate and compete, a constant and complex process of alliances that are shifting. Additionally, two processes of learning are preliminarily distinguished: competition and emulation. While the Department 'Integration and Conflict' understands conflict as a form of integration, in the group project such integration occurs through competition and emulation. Finally, the field research that will be conducted is complementary to the field research of all three Departments.

From Learning to Unlearning

Like with all research it is essential to be aware of one's own normative agenda when conducting terrorism research. The Research Group's aspiration is to contribute research that supports peace processes. As Günther Schlee notes, "Incidentally, ever since Auschwitz we have known that perpetrators of violence are entirely normal people in other contexts."[31] Terrorist groups that learn can also learn to be negotiation partners. While learning can lead to radicalisation,[32] learning can also lead to deradicalisation. Experience with success and with failure will impact a group's willingness to engage in a peace process.

It has been found, for example, that the speed by which lessons are learned or unlearned by individual people depends on the reinforcement frequency of failures or successes: "Reinforcements that occur after every repetition of a specific behavior produce fast learning but the learned behaviors are readily unlearned. Reinforcements that occur randomly after some repetitions but not after all repetitions produce slow learning but the learned behaviors are difficult to unlearn later."[33] Translating such processes from the micro level to the macro level, reactions to and reinforcements on terrorist groups by states accordingly have an impact on learning or unlearning.

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[31] Schlee, Günther. 2014. *How terrorists are made*. Research outlook. Annual Report 2014 of the Max Planck Society, p. 23.

[32] On a different level (Muslim communities) see: Görzig, Carolin and Khaled Al-Hashimi. 2015. *Radicalization in Western Europe*. London, New York: Routledge.

[33] Starbuck, William H. and Bo Hedberg. 2015. *How organizations learn from success and failure*. Available at SSRN 2708267. Print, p. 5.

The recent peace process in Colombia reveals that groups once labelled 'terrorists' come to the negotiation table. (Photo: C. Görzig, 2006, Bogota, Colombia)

Such mechanisms, for example, are investigated quantitatively and especially qualitatively in order to arrive at findings that can be used to make predictions about how terrorist groups unlearn terror. My doctoral studies on "Negotiating with Terrorists" is the basis of this Research Group. While interviewees during my doctoral field research metaphorically referred to spaces, rooms, and windows to express limitations of possibilities of expression, they often referred to means of transport to describe changes of mind and processes of transformation. For example, Jama'ah Islamiya members stressed that gaining new insights was like realising that one has to communicate with others when flying an airplane. Al-Qaeda, in turn, was depicted as a car without a driver.[34] Which path these and other groups will come to take also depends on the decision of whether to bargain with them or not. While terrorist groups can unlearn terrorism and take part in negotiation processes, states can also unlearn terror and move away from the unyielding stance of never negotiating with terrorists.[35] The terrorism-state-terror conundrum is, unsurprisingly, part of the discussion on the contested term 'terrorism', a discussion the next section will elaborate upon.

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[34] Görzig, Carolin. 2012. *Talking to terrorists.* London, New York: Routledge, p. xv.
[35] On conflict negotiations see: Görzig, Carolin and Claudia Hoffmann. 2015. The dark side of recognition. In: Daase, Christopher, Anna Geis et al. (eds.). *Recognition in international relations.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan; and: Görzig, Carolin and Claudia Hoffmann. 2016. *The hurting way out.* Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Paper 177. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Look Who is Learning: a contested research subject

Michael Fürstenberg

Like its object, the study of terrorism can be described as having arrived in waves, with the first starting in the 1970s in the wake of attacks by leftist 'urban guerrillas', especially in Latin America and Western Europe. Until the attacks of September 11, 2001, however, this kind of research was largely a specialised field, in which only a small scholarly community along with non-academic 'security experts' engaged in.[36] With the attacks on the Twin Towers, this changed rapidly, and what was once a marginal subject of social science developed into a full-fledged programme of 'terrorism studies'.[37] The difficulty of finding a universally accepted definition has plagued, however, virtually all endeavours to study the phenomenon. The debate has even been called by Brian Jenkins the "Bermuda Triangle of terrorism research",[38] and the assertion that terrorism is an "essentially contested concept"[39] necessarily eluding efforts to pin it down are a staple in studies dealing with the matter.[40] The prevalent intermingling of different levels or arenas of discussion – the academic on the one hand and the public and politico-legal on the other – has certainly not helped to solve conceptual confusions. Unfortunately, the discipline itself has partly contributed to this conflation, due to its peculiar existence in an "interstitial space between the realms of politics and science".[41] Especially in the second wave after 9/11, the growth of studies about terrorism largely followed an exploding demand for answers by the public, media, and the state, which provided money and jobs to the hitherto small community of experts as well as external newcomers. With the media and especially the state being not only the main sponsors but also the preeminent consumers of terrorism expertise, the main focus of early research lay largely on a problem-solving approach with a heavy bias towards counter-terrorism

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[36] Ranstorp, Magnus (ed.). 2006. *Mapping terrorism research: state of the art, gaps and future direction.* London, New York: Routledge.

[37] Stampnitzky, Lisa. 2013. *Disciplining terror: how experts invented "terrorism".* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

[38] Ibid., p. 5.

[39] Gallie, Walter B. 1956. Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56: 167–198.

[40] Daase, Christopher. 2001. Terrorismus – Begriffe, Theorien und Gegenstrategien. Ergebnisse und Probleme sozialwissenschaftlicher Forschung. *Die Friedens-Warte* 76(1): 55–70; Weinberg, Leonard, Ami Pedahzur and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler. 2004. The challenges of conceptualizing terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16(4): 777–794; Schmid, Alex P. (ed.). 2011. *The definition of terrorism. The Routledge handbook of terrorism research.* London, New York: Routledge, 39–157.

[41] Stampnitzky, Lisa. 2010. Disciplining an unruly field: terrorism experts and theories of scientific/intellectual production. *Qualitative Sociology* 34(1): 7. It should be noted that the following is relevant mostly to the American or English-speaking community.

issues rather than basic research or conceptual pieces.[42] In the wake of the 'Global War on Terror', many established as well as self-styled terrorism scholars became engaged in state and security agencies, blurring the line between academic research and political and administrative activities. For a systematic treatment of the question, it is however important to clearly delineate the different discourses and their dimensions. In the *public and political arena*, usage of the term is usually normative – it is not so much a description of a specific political behaviour, but an ascription of certain characteristics to actors and causes. 'Terrorism' is a pejorative label attached to violent (or sometimes even non-violent) political action that marks the enemies' damnability (and thereby justifies extraordinary measures to fight them). Whether from the perspective of states or non-state opposition groups and their respective supporters, 'terrorism' is only that which others do. This pertains not only to the truism that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter",[43] but is in fact part of the general construction of collective identities: As Eva Herschinger argues, "the desire to define terrorism is not only the desire to give a precise content to terrorism and, thereby, create the identity of an Other. It is also the desire to create a collective identity, a 'Self'."[44] This maybe explains why states still struggle to find a common legal definition of terrorism in the United Nations, although these efforts have continued predictably in vain for more than forty years. As terrorism in this view is inherently associated with the Other, from which the Self distances itself, no objective definition of terrorism or terrorist actors is possible; the term only has relative meaning in the socio-political discourse. In an *academic – and especially social science – approach*, terrorism is instead a specific area or subject of study, where generally two perspectives are possible: the first can be called 'constructivist' and understands terrorism exclusively or partly as a discursive act, a 'social fact', whose nature is not inherent to the violent act itself, but is dependent upon processes of interpretation, categorisation, and labelling.[45] The task of research is then to study and de-construct the various discourses in which the term is ascribed to specific forms of actual violence as well as to analyse the very real impacts those discourses, or "practice of meaning-making"[46], have. This means that, first and foremost, the aforementioned popular and political discourses (as well as the academic discourse

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[42] Ranstorp, Magnus. 2009. Mapping terrorism studies after 9/11: an academic field of old problems and new prospects. In: Jackson, Richard, Marie B. Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.). *Critical terrorism studies: a new research agenda*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 13–33.

[43] As has often been noted, the distinction that is suggested in this staple of all kinds of terrorism literature actually makes no sense from a logical standpoint of view, as one refers to a cause or end ('freedom') and the other to a method or means to achieve it ('terrorism').

[44] Herschinger, Eva. 2013. A battlefield of meanings: the struggle for identity in the UN Debates on a definition of international terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25(2): 183–201.

[45] Jackson, Richard, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.). 2009. *Critical terrorism studies: a new research agenda*. London, New York: Routledge; Spencer, Alexander. 2010. *The tabloid terrorist: the predicative construction of new terrorism in the media.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[46] Stump, Jacob L. 2009. The artful side of the terrorism discourse: a response to Hülsse & Spencer. *Security Dialogue* 40(6): 661.

itself) are the main object of study for this strand of terrorism research. For example, the invocation of the terrorism-label is used to determine the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of violence, and as "states have the power to define specific acts as 'terrorist' while absolving themselves from blame"[47], 'terrorism' has become essentially a non-state activity in the discourse. A large part of this literature, which for the most part associates itself with 'critical terrorism studies', is concerned with how the terrorism label was transformed and is employed in the context of the War on Terror, and how this has changed the international as well as domestic political arena. In this process, it is argued, terrorism was redefined in Western societies as an existential security threat which necessitated an essentially 'no-holds-barred'-response, unrelated to the actual physical danger it entailed.[48] Furthermore, terrorism played an important role in "defining the enemy",[49] being associated primarily with Islamic groups and, as a consequence, often with Muslims in general in the public mind.[50] As 'terrorism' in this sense is in essence a "cultural phenomenon"[51], anthropological approaches are well-suited to approach this aspect. Terrorism has for example been described as being part of a modern mythology,[52] with mechanisms akin to witch-hunt societies.[53] Through their focus on fieldwork, anthropologists have also been at the forefront of studying so-called 'terrorist' movements and the consequences of the application of the terrorism label to "suspect communities".[54]

The second academic approach assumes instead that the term terrorism really has an "empirical correlate",[55] in other words, that there really is a specific subset

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[47] Dixit, Priya. 2016. Securitization and terroristization: analyzing states' usage of the rhetoric of terror-ism. In: Bettina Koch (ed.). *State terror, state violence: global perspectives*. Wiesbaden: Springer, p. 46.

[48] Fierke, Karin M. 2015. *Critical approaches to international security*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[49] Boulton, Jack. 2013. Defining the enemy: myth and representation in the war on terror. *Vis-à-vis: explorations in anthropology* 12(1): 54–66.

[50] Jackson, Richard. 2007. Constructing enemies: 'islamic terrorism' in political and academic discourse. *Government and Opposition* 42(3): 394–426; Spencer, Alexander. 2010. *The tabloid terrorist: the predica-tive construction of new terrorism in the media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[51] Sluka, Jeffrey A. 2009. The contribution of anthropology to critical terrorism studies. In: Jackson, Richard, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.). *Critical terrorism studies: a new research agenda*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 146.

[52] Zulaika, Joseba and William A. Douglass. 1996. *Terror and taboo: the follies, fables and face of terrorism*. London, New York: Routledge.

[53] Zulaika, Joseba. 2012. Drones, witches and other flying objects: the force of fantasy in US counter-terrorism. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(1): 51–68; Nader, Laura. 2017. Anthropology of law, fear, and the War on Terror. *Anthropology Today* 33(1): 26–28.

[54] Smyth, Marie Breen. 2009. Subjectivities, 'suspect communities', governments, and the ethics of research on 'terrorism'. In: Jackson, Richard, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.). *Criti-cal Terrorism Studies: a new research agenda*. London, New York: Routledge: 194–215. Mahmood, Cyntia K. 1996. *Fighting for faith and nation: dialogues with Sikh militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Toros, Harmonie. 2008. Terrorists, scholars and ordinary people. Confronting terrorism studies with field experiences. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1(2): 279–292; Atran, Scott. 2010. *Talking to the enemy. Faith, brotherhood, and the (un)making of terrorists*. New York: Ecco Press.

[55] Armborst, Andreas. 2010. Modelling terrorism and political violence. *International Relations* 24(4): 414–432.

of actual violence that is different from other forms and that can and should be conceptually distinguished from related events in empirical research. This view corresponds to the mainstream of terrorism research, in which the majority of the "definitional debate" plays out. Although scholars following this approach concur on the discourse-independent existence of terrorism, not all agree on the merit of this debate. One of the most prominent critics is Walter Laqueur, who already denied both the possibility and usefulness of a solid definition at the outset of the analysis of terrorism, basically suggesting an 'I know it when I see it' approach.[56] Of course, even Walter Laqueur had to admit that certain criteria are necessary to at least broadly delimit the object of investigation. By refusing to explicitly discuss and substantiate the use of the term terrorism, however, the basis of his analysis is in danger of being ultimately arbitrary and unusable for the purpose of systematic comparison. Most authors therefore agree on the daunting nature of the task, but also that a useful solution is possible, at least for empirical purposes.

Several attempts to synthesise an academic consensus definition from the multitude of approaches have been made.[57] And while differences may be stark between some of them, many of the definitions proposed by experts and used in the literature actually refer to mostly the same basic ideas, or elements, even if they differ in how they express them and how much weight they give them. Those elements can be seen as being the "building blocks" of a definition of terrorism, and despite the ubiquitous handwringing in the literature about the futility of trying to define terrorism, a growing consensus in this mainly empirically oriented literature has nonetheless recently emerged with regard to a few characteristics, even if these are in no way truly universally accepted or agreed upon in their specifics. "Most scholars agree that terrorism is a form of violence or threatened violence against a target to achieve a goal. It is meant to induce fear in an audience that is different from the target of the violence. (…) Some argue that the target of the violence has to be a civilian or a non-combatant, while others relax this restriction."[58] Notably, similar

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[56] Laqueur, Walter. 1977. *Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown.

[57] Schmid, Alex P. and A. J. Jongman. 1988. *Political terrorism: a new guide to actors and authors, data bases, and literature*. Expanded and updated ed. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers; Weinberg, Leonard, Ami Pedahzur and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler. 2004. The challenges of conceptualizing terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16(4): 777–794.; Schmid, Alex P. (ed.). 2011. *The definition of terrorism. The Routledge handbook of terrorism research*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 39–157.

[58] Young, Joseph K. and Michael G. Findley. 2011. Promise and pitfalls of terrorism research. *International Studies Review* 13(3): 411–431.

observations come from both 'mainstream'[59] as well as 'critical'[60] strands of terrorism studies. One of the major bones of contention in the literature, however, refers to questions regarding the perpetrators of this type of violence. It is also one of the most politically contentious, of course, as the term 'terrorist' is even more laden than 'terrorism'. Most commonly, terrorism is associated with non-state organisations fighting local insurgencies or attacking international targets. As terrorism is seen from an academic standpoint as just one form of violent contestation, no group is inherently 'terroristic' in nature. Instead, generally the term 'terrorist organisation' simply describes armed actors who employ terrorism as a tactic. In this broad approach, organisations are located along a wide spectrum, where terrorism can include periodical actions by groups engaged in broader political struggles as well as constituting the main or even exclusive action of distinct groups and networks, although the latter are empirically rare.[61] 'Critical' accounts contend that this focus is a consequence of the historical closeness of terrorism studies to state agencies and funding, and that the 'mainstream' literature deliberately ignores the use of terror by states – thereby contributing to the legitimisation of state and discrediting of non-state violence.[62] However, while there is surely a disproportionate focus on non-state terrorism, especially in the post-9/11 terrorism literature, the conceptual position that governments *categorically* cannot employ terroristic methods seems to be held only by a minority. As Richard Jackson observes, "there are a great many prominent scholars who acknowledge in passing that terrorism is a strategy of political violence which any actor can employ, including states, but then do not examine cases of state terrorism in any systematic or sustained manner."[63] This imbalance seems to result mainly from research-pragmatic reasons and incentives of the academic system, as well as the more fundamental fact that states and non-state organisations are conceptualised as fundamentally different. So while the ultimate aims and effects of terrorism by different types of actors may essentially appear the same, the processes by which these come about are likely to be different. Reflecting

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[59] Schmid, Alex P. (ed). 2011. *The definition of terrorism. The Routledge handbook of terrorism research*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 39–157.; Lutz, James. 2010. A critical view of critical terrorism studies. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4(6): 31–40.

[60] Jackson, Richard. 2010. An argument for terrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2(2): 25–32. ; Sluka, Jeffrey A. 2008. Terrorism and taboo: an anthropological perspective on political violence against civilians. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1(2): 167–183.; Blakeley, Ruth. 2010. State terrorism in the social sciences. Theories, methods and concepts. In: Richard Jackson, Eamon Murphy and Scott Poynting (eds.). *Contemporary state terrorism: theory and practice*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 12–27.

[61] Tilly, Charles. 2004. Terror, terrorism, terrorists. *Sociological Theory* 22(1): 5–13.

[62] Lutz, James. 2010. A critical view of critical terrorism studies. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4(6): 31–40.

[63] Jackson, Richard. 2008. The ghosts of state terror: knowledge, politics and terrorism studies. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1(3): 380.

this reasoning, it is common in the literature to make a distinction between '(non-state) terrorism' and '(state) terror'.[64]

While it is unfortunately true that state terrorism remains understudied, there are numerous case studies that contain detailed terroristic campaigns by states and their agents.[65] One of the most acclaimed collections, dealing with the operation of 'death squads', was notably edited and largely authored by scholars from the field of anthropology.[66] Increasing attention is also given to practices of 'counter-terrorism', especially drone warfare, as potentially terroristic violence themselves.[67]

As this short overview demonstrates, the question of whether and how a useful conceptualisation of terrorism is possible is not only an important part of, but in fact constitutive for terrorism studies itself: as Jeroen Gunning has noted, "'terrorism' does not constitute an obvious central organizing concept on which to build a field",[68] and the instrumental role that the state played in its inception – and therefore in its political character – cannot be denied. The resulting widespread confusion of the academic and politico-legal arenas of discussion in both mainstream and critical accounts is surely a major reason why, in spite of being at the forefront of both the 'old' and 'new' waves of terrorism research, the debate on the definition of terrorism is so volatile and controversial. Under these circumstances, it is all the more important to note that both academic perspectives (terrorism as discursive vs. real-world act) are logically not mutually exclusive – it is on the contrary quite illuminating to compare the everyday applications and ramifications of the term with empirical violent events.

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[64] This dichotomy, which relates the phenomenon to configurations of power, was invoked right from the outset of modern terrorism studies: Already in the early 1960s, Thornton made a classic distinction between violence by incumbents who use "enforcement terror" and insurgents who use "agitational terror": Thornton, Thomas P. 1964. Terror as a weapon of political agitation. In: Eckstein, Harry (ed.). *Internal war: problems and approaches*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, pp. 71–99. This distinction is, paradoxically, implicitly also upheld by 'critical' scholars, who focus their attention predominantly on the former.

[65] See for example: Campbell, Bruce B. and Arthur D. Brenner (eds.). 2000. *Death squads in a global perspective: murder with deniability*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan; Robben, Antonius C.G.M. 2005. *Political violence and trauma in Argentina*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Ganesan, N. and Kim Sung Chull. 2013. *State violence in East Asia*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky; Koch, Bettina (ed.). 2016. *State terror, state violence: global perspectives*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. For a bibliography see Price, Eric. 2014. Domestic state (or regime) terrorism and repression. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8(5): 117–126.

[66] Sluka, Jeffrey A. (ed.). 2000. *Death squad. The anthropology of state terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

[67] Poynting, Scott and David Whyte. 2012. *Counter-terrorism and state political violence: the "war on terror" as terror. Critical Terrorism Studies*. London, New York: Routledge; Stroeken, Koen (ed.). 2012. *War, technology, anthropology*. Pbk. ed. New York: Berghahn Books.

[68] Gunning, Jeroen. 2007. Babies and bathwaters: reflecting on the pitfalls of critical terrorism studies. *European Political Science* 6(3): 239.

On the back of the van we see a picture of Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, and Assad. Is terrorism in the eye of the beholder? The inscription reads "Ministry of Health". (Photo: C. Görzig, 2008, Damascus, Syria)

We concur with what Jeffrey A. Sluka calls an "anthropological perspective", where 'terrorism' is "both an objective reality and a cultural construct",[69] which are both worthy fields of research. As an empirical project we consider terrorism as a specific form of political violence which can, for analytical purposes, be distinguished from other means and modes of pursuing violent conflict. At the outset, we follow the gist of the definition established above, where terrorism is (the threat of) the use of violence as a calculated instrument in a political conflict, targeting non-combatants and addressing audience(s) beyond the immediate victims. At the same time, PhD students will face local definitions of terrorism and violence in the field that will challenge them to deconstruct the term. For pragmatic reasons, the research project is focused on non-state actors, or 'terrorism from below'. However, the different projects touch upon state terror when analysing the macro level and the group will expand its focus in a future step as elaborated upon in the last chapter.

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[69] Sluka, Jeffrey A. 2008. Terrorism and taboo: an anthropological perspective on political violence against civilians. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1(2): 167–183.

Box 1: Is the new terrorism yesterday's news? Results and perspectives of terrorism research in Germany
A workshop organised in cooperation between Carolin Görzig, MPI Halle, and Christopher Daase, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (HSFK)

What do we really know about terrorism? The events since 9/11 have shown that 'terrorism' is always changing and that militant groups constantly challenge the security of societies and states with new forms of violence. The volatility of the events and the pace of the political debate challenges science. Insights have to be checked and our knowledge has to be adapted and renewed frequently. What is still valid from the old theories? And is the 'new' terrorism not already a thing of the past? The workshop therefore pursued three aims. Firstly, it took stock of previous achievements, raising the question of which theories and research results have stood up to time and which have not, from the point of view of different disciplinary perspectives (history, anthropology, Islamic studies, psychology, political science, intercultural studies). Secondly, the workshop conducted an analysis of the research demand, discussing what sort of research needs do exist and what personal and institutional conditions are necessary – in the framework of international comparison as well. Thirdly, it was concerned with research planning, including the first steps towards institutional and personal cooperation and the development of more interdisciplinary and integrative research methods.

Participants in the Workshop "Is the new terrorism yesterday's news? Results and perspectives of terrorism research in Germany", October 13th, 2016. (Photo: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2016)

First Insights

Carolin Görzig and Michael Fürstenberg

As the introductory chapter elaborated upon, learning does not occur in a vacuum. The research project is designed to study the context of terrorist learning on the micro, meso and macro level. The qualitative individual projects within the Research Group are complemented by joint quantitative projects that should help to gather initial insights. In the following some of these insights are presented as ordered along the three contextual dimensions.

Comparing the Impact of the Meso Level and the Macro Level

Our research on the merger between the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat/ Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (GSPC/AQIM) and Al Qaeda resulted in a comparison of the influence of the macro level and the meso level on the tactical and strategic learning of the group.[70]

The GSPC/AQIM has learned tactically from Al Qaeda. The introduction of suicide bombings can be seen in the context of the merger. In 2007 alone, the year of the rebranding of the GSPC to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Jean-Luc Marret reports AQIM perpetrated ten suicide bombings and the GTD reports 25 suicide bombings attributed to AQIM between 2007 and 2013.[71] Furthermore, suicide attacks are a trademark of Al Qaeda. Other tactical innovations such as synchronised attacks and the use of internet videos for propaganda purposes equally reveal the influence of Al Qaeda on AQIM's tactical evolution. However, AQIM has not learned strategically from Al Qaeda. Instead, its shifts in strategy were induced through pressure by the government. Thus, the GSPC changed strategies because its predecessor – the GIA – had been decisively weakened by the Algerian government. The rejection of the doctrine of the apostate society was a reaction to a strategic mistake by the GIA that had been consequential for the GIA's support in the population and its position vis-à-vis the state. Hassan Hattab founded the GSPC to correct this mistake. The second strategic choice, attacking the far enemy within the local environment, equally resulted from government pressure. Increased counter-terrorism efforts after September 11, 2001, including American and European support for the Algerian government's counter-terrorism efforts, weakened the GSPC which attempted to merge with Al Qaeda as a consequence. As a result, the GSPC tried to internationalise its efforts, mostly in rhetoric. The alliance with global jihad was a result of changed strategies, not a motivation for strategic learning.

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[70] This research was conducted in collaboration with Nancy Morris from Virginia Commonwealth University.

[71] Marret, Jean-Luc. 2008. Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: a 'glocal' organization. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31: 541–552.

While the meso level has an impact on tactics, the macro level impacts strategies. We can therefore conclude that government pressure has been more consequential than the merger with Al Qaeda. AQIM learned tactically and changed its approach as a result of its alliance with Al Qaeda, and changed its strategies as a result of force. While the impact of allying with global jihad is limited to tactical innovations, the strategic reactions to counter-terrorism are of a far more consequential nature.[72] Algeria's AQIM illustrates how 'state terror' and non-state 'terrorism' co-evolve. Since state actions are so consequential for the strategic learning of terrorist groups, alternative state actions that lead to strategies of unlearning terror will be researched in qualitative projects.

Observations at the Meso Level

As the example of AQIM has shown, terrorist groups do not exist in isolation but have forged linkages with one another "[f]rom the outset of the modern epoch of trans-national terrorism".[73] Connections can range from one-time arrangements, tactical alliances and collaboration in specific attacks, to long-term cooperation in formalised networks, as in the franchise and associate system of Al Qaeda. To draw on experiences and examples of other non-state actors, on the 'meso level' of learning-input according to our framework, can include more indirect forms of learning, i.e. through inspiration and demonstration effects, as well as the direct transfer of knowledge and skills about specific weapons, tactics or even strategy through manuals, training units, or the exchange of personnel. Cooperation with other non-state violent actors has been shown in studies to enhance the destructive capabilities of terrorist groups as well as their longevity.[74] Most of the research has been static, however. In contrast, we focused on the *dynamics* of cooperation, namely whether there is a short-term impact of cooperation or whether these are processes that work over a longer period of time. Moreover, we speculate that the striking of new alliances will have different effects determined on the existing cooperative ties a group has or not.[75]

In a first attempt, we looked at a specific outcome of 'tactical learning' that has been shown to be transmitted through intergroup networks, namely the use of suicide

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[72] Görzig, Carolin and Nancy Morris. Work in progress.

[73] Siqueira, Kevin and Todd Sandler. 2010. Terrorist networks, support, and delegation. *Public Choice* 142(1–2): 237.

[74] Asal, Victor and R.K. Rethemeyer. 2008. The nature of the beast: organizational structures and the lethality of terrorist attacks. *The Journal of Politics* 70(2): 437–449; Horowitz, Michael C. and Philipp B.K. Potter. 2014. Allying to kill: terrorist intergroup cooperation and the consequences for lethality. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58(2): 199–225; Phillips, Brian J. 2014. Terrorist group cooperation and longevity. *International Studies Quarterly* 58(2): 336–347; Asal, Victor H., Hyun H. Park, R.K. Rethemeyer and Gary Ackerman. 2016. With friends like these … Why terrorist organizations ally. *International Public Management Journal* 19(1): 1–30.

[75] This research has been presented, in various forms, at the ECPR General Conference 2016, Prague; the workshop *Ist der neue Terrorismus von Gestern?*, organized by the MPI and the Peace Research Institute, Frankfurt, and the Research Colloquium of the Chair for International Relations at TU Braunschweig.

terrorism.[76] Interestingly, while collaboration that expands a network immediately translates into an increased use of suicide bombings, there is a delay if the group did not have alliances the previous year – in this case, the effect is measurable only later, but then very strongly. A tentative interpretation would be that groups without experience in cooperation need more time to make use of new information, as they start out from a 'lower level'. Furthermore, we observed a short-term momentum of innovation after a merger that fades out after a short while, as again the example of GSPC/AQIM demonstrates:
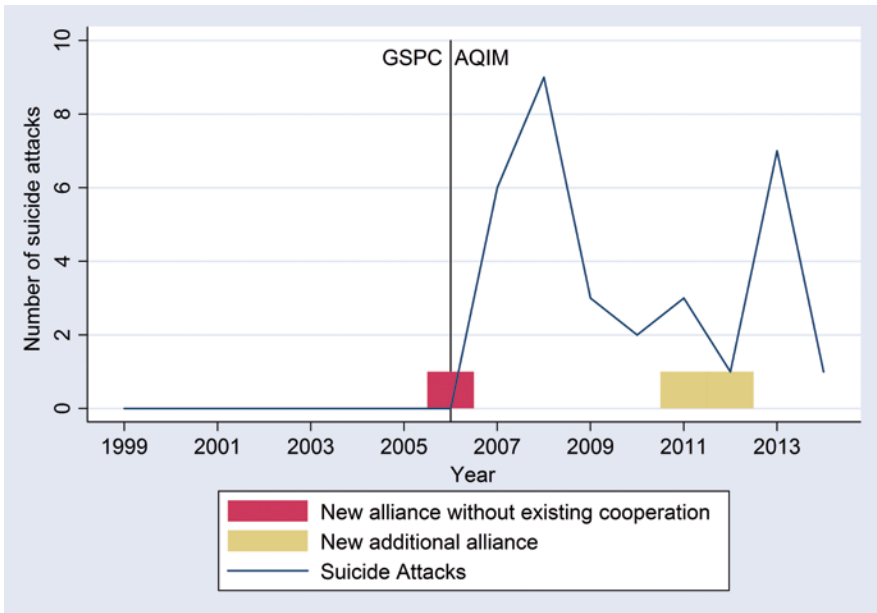
GSPC/AQIM began using suicide attacks only after its merger with Al Qaeda, with numbers declining after an initial steep increase and rising again temporarily after the striking of additional alliances.

Tentative observations regarding delay, momentum or the question of the impact of previous collaborations can be translated into questions for qualitative research: Which processes occur during a delay? What happens during a period of momentum, when do short-term processes of learning (and can we then speak of learning?) take place, and when do long-term, sustainable processes occur? What impact does previous experience with collaboration have for learning from later collaborations? Are learning mechanisms institutionalised as a result of previous experiences?

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[76] Horowitz, Michael C. 2010. Nonstate actors and the diffusion of innovations: the case of suicide terrorism. *International Organization* 64(1): 33; Horowitz, Michael C. 2015. The rise and spread of suicide bombing. *Annual Review of Political Science* 18(1): 69–84. Consequently, the dependent variable is the number of suicide attacks a group conducted in a given year, with establishment of cooperation in that and/or the previous year as the main independent factors.

Observations at the Micro Level:
incremental and radical innovations and longevity

Terrorist organisations generally operate under constant threat of survival, facing state repression and counter-terrorism as well as the danger of organisational decline due to inactivity and competition from other groups. Yet some wreak havoc for decades while others vanish after few attacks or are quickly defeated. Most studies dealing with the learning, transformation, adaption, and innovation of terrorist groups agree that survival is one of the key motivations for organisations to change and show flexibility.[77] Being flexible and adaptable in their operational behaviour should help groups to survive and stay relevant. On the other hand, however, a departure from tried and tested tactics and strategies in favour of more diversity could also entail costs and an increased risk of failure. So far, the literature on terrorist learning and innovative behaviour has primarily concentrated on the conditions favouring or inhibiting progress and change. One recurring theme is for example the assertion that older and more established organisations are less likely to leave beaten paths, becoming entrenched in existing tactics and less likely to adopt new ones.[78] Moreover, while experienced groups are often better at adopting incremental innovations, disruptive innovations that require changing organisational forms or transforming operational methods can challenge more established groups.[79] While organisational age in this case is an independent variable, we turned this argument on its head by asking *what influence innovative capacity has on the longevity of organisations* – are terrorist groups exhibiting higher levels of flexibility and change more or less likely to fail?

   As our quantitative results demonstrate,[80] innovative capacity on average indeed enhances the longevity of organisations. However, tactical innovation is less significant for longevity than strategic innovation. When assuming that strategic innovations are usually more radical and tactical innovations more incremental, it can be concluded that radical innovations guarantee longevity to a greater extent than incremental innovations. This research will be developed further by looking into the radical strategic change of de-radicalisation and unlearning terror. The

[77] Trujillo, Horacio and Brian A. Jackson. 2006. Organizational learning and terrorist groups. In: James JL Forest (ed.). *Teaching terror: strategic and tactical learning in the terrorist world*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 52-68; Blomberg, S.B., Khusrav Gaibulloev and Todd Sandler. 2011. Terrorist group survival: ideology, tactics, and base of operations. *Public Choice* 149(3–4): 441–463; Young, Joseph K. and Laura Dugan. 2014. Survival of the fittest: why terrorist groups endure. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8(2): 2–23.

[78] Gill, Paul, John Horgan, Samuel T. Hunter and Lily D. Cushenbery. 2013. Malevolent creativity in terrorist organizations. *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 47(2): 125–151.

[79] Horowitz, Michael C. 2010. Nonstate actors and the diffusion of innovations: the case of suicide terrorism. *International Organization* 64(1): 33-64.

[80] Görzig, Carolin and Michael Fürstenberg. 2017. Revise or demise – innovative capacity and the longevity of terrorist groups. Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Conference, 22–25.2.2017, Baltimore.

findings of this research will complement the insights on the influential impact of the macro level described above. The resulting questions can thereby be translated to the individual level: Are members who hold longer memberships more inclined towards incremental or radical innovations? How do followers and leaders differ in their propensity to innovate? When and by whom does strategic learning and unlearning of violence take place?

While the methodological focus of the Research Group lies in qualitative studies and fieldwork, we also conduct complementary quantitative analyses as the examples above have shown. These statistical studies provide context to cases and identify general patterns, which might be worth looking into in more detail. They raise new questions that can be investigated qualitatively to look at mechanisms of learning in depth. The qualitative field research is thereby challenging in its own right.

From recruiting locals to recruiting abroad: groups innovate. (Photo: C. Görzig, 2008, Damascus, Syria)

A Challenging Field

Carolin Görzig

As the section on the contested concept of terrorism revealed, multiple researchers agree that states make use of terroristic means. In the political discourse terrorists are always the others or in the words of a Kurd: "What is violence what not (...) that is a political question."[81] Hence, what is not violence is equally a matter of perspective. Field research in a conflict setting comes along with multiple challenges. Among others, it can help the researcher to realise that even peace is an agenda. Research in the field pushes the researcher to step out of his or her own normative context. Although an academic project can be distinguished from a political ambition, each researcher has implicit normative assumptions. An applicable example is the matter of the researcher's nationality, something I was confronted with while researching for my own PhD in four different countries. While in Colombia, an interviewee lamented the ambiguous impact and ambitions of the international community when meddling in the Colombian conflict. In Kurdish Turkey, Germany was associated with weapons exports to the Turkish government. In Syria, in turn, Hamas emphasized Anti-Zionism. And finally, in Egypt during a demonstration against the Lebanon war, the flag of Israel served as a doormat. While these different traces and connotations of my national background raised my awareness of not even being able in principle to look at my research and my interview partners from a fully distant, objective standpoint, it also pushed me to relativise my own normative context.[82]

Doing field research on terrorism, scholars are also confronted with problems of access which are often caused by the fear of the interview subjects to talk openly about sensitive matters. State violence can usher in a culture of silence which can go as far as people believing that just talking about the conflict can provoke it. At the same time, many interviewees enjoy talking and being listened to. The willingness to talk and to be listened to frequently comes along with hopes and expectations a researcher can hardly fulfil. These expectations can burden the researcher with feelings of guilt such that the interviewees "may be living inside your head."[83]

Nonetheless, expectations of interviewees also confront the researcher with the need to reflect on his or her responsibility and role in conducting research in sensitive contexts. Guilt, the burden of responsibility or simply naivety and ignorance can lead a researcher and his or her research to be used as a propaganda tool. The issue impacts upon the question of whether a researcher and his or her published research might actually serve propaganda purposes. The problem becomes even more apparent when researching and actually publishing demonising statements or hate speeches.

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[81] Görzig, Carolin. 2012. *Talking to terrorists.* London, New York: Routledge, p. xi.
[82] Ibid., p. xii.
[83] Ibid., p. xiv.

As not only the researcher and the research are affected by the interaction, but also those who are the subject of the research, ethical problems also factor into the equation. Increased intelligence gathering after 9/11 has led to debates in anthropology about ethics questions of spying and social responsibility.[84] This touches upon the question of to what extent researchers are a burden to their interviewees and contact persons. In the end, there are clear ethical limits to doing everything for a cause such as a publication on sensitive issues. It is pivotal to regard the interviewees as the subjects of research who want to have a certain control over what is written about them.

In spite of these challenges, multiple scholars have done research in sensitive conflict settings. Scott Atran, for example, has interviewed terrorists in order to inquire into their motivations. Similarly, Anne Speckhard as well as Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben did field work "under fire", to name just a few.[85] Since during ethnographic research researchers frequently develop a sense of empathy with their subjects, scholars who research violent actors are faced with questioning their own normative agenda. For this purpose and out of intellectual curiosity researching terrorism is as challenging as it is rewarding.

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[84] Addaia Marradas: Anthropology and the "War on Terror: Analysis of a Complex Relationship" Ma Adst Programme 2006–2007. https://www.google.de/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd= 1&ved=0ahUKEwiinN6I87_UAhUTlxQKHUKyCE4QFggtMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sussex.ac.uk%2Fanthropology%2Fdocuments%2Fmarrades.pdf&usg=AFQjCNGyhBbuTS4CB7atyxHJJI_Fc1GM6Q&cad=rja (Available online, accessed on June 15, 2017).

[85] Atran, Scott. 2010. *Talking to the enemy. Faith, brotherhood, and the (un)making of terrorists*. New York: Ecco Press; Speckhard, Anne. 2012. *Talking to terrorists. Understanding the psycho-social motivations of militant jihadi terrorists, mass hostage takers, suicide bombers & "martyrs"*. McLean, VA: Advances Press; Nordstrom, Carolyn and Antonius Robben (ed.). 1995. *Fieldwork under fire. Contemporary studies of violence and survival*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.

Box 2: Preparing for the Field

Workshop "Field Research in Conflict Regions – Experiences, Input and Dialogue", December 1, 2016
This workshop brought together experts who shared their experiences with field research in sensitive areas and on sensitive topics. The workshop had a rather informal character with abundant opportunities for discussion and exchange. Among other matters, issues of security, ethical questions, the role of gender in field research, and problems and opportunities of access were discussed.

Training with Dr. Renate Haas, November 24, 2016
Experiences of extreme violence and disregard, as well as boundary and crisis situations can greatly disturb the professional integrity and self-confidence of researchers. They can lead to a decrease in scientific curiosity or, however, also to social withdrawal and a considerable inability to deal with ambiguous or ambivalent situations. This is reflected, for example, in role confusion and/or boundary violations in the course of observation, data collection, and interviews. Work disruptions and confusion can even occur later during the evaluation of the acquired data, research logs, and transcriptions, hindering the successful conclusion of scientific research. The goal of this workshop was to equip PhD students with methodical tools to help them, especially in situations of crisis and danger, to maintain and regain their emotional capacities to perceive, reflect, and report, and possibly to develop new courses of action.

Security Training GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH), November 21–23, 2016
During this course of training provided by the GIZ, PhD students could benefit from being able to assess their future working and everyday lives in a more realistic way regarding possible risks and threats. By using methods and tools including interactive teaching, case studies/critical incidents, reflection in small groups, videos, exercises, and simulation, the PhD students learned how to carry out risk assessment and how to develop proactive attitudes for dealing with threats. The course of training also offered preventive and post-processing measures, strategies in case of violence (e.g. attack, burglary, theft, kidnapping) and showed how previous strategies for dealing with those situations can be enhanced.

In-House Training with Günther Schlee, November 2–3, 2016
In this workshop PhD students learned from Günther Schlee how genealogies can be used to visualise networks, with the micro-census as a possible tool for field research, as well as how to maintain field diaries in order to process and reflect upon information and experiences. One important topic that was discussed concerned the anonymity of interview partners and the potential ethical and practical implications thereof. Furthermore, the matter of developing empathy with field subjects and the chances and risks it entails were touched upon.

Three PhD Projects

The training units and workshops were organised to prepare the PhD students for the ethics and security-related challenges of their qualitative field research. Each project will be realised in a different country. While the three PhD projects relate to the overall framework, they differ in their choice of region, in their focus on different levels of analysis and in their preliminary conceptual approaches. They are presented in the following.

Modes of Rebel Interaction and Organisational
Dynamics in Civil War: the Syrian case
Regine Schwab

After starting as a mainly secular uprising in March 2011, the Syrian revolution soon became more influenced by groups raising the black banner. As early as 2012, several media reports argued that (global) jihadist groups had been exceeding their secular or "independent" Islamist co-rebels in terms of efficiency and success on the battlefield.[86] However, since the early periods of the conflict, Sunni Arab rebel groups of all ideological colours have been characterised by a great volatility and short lifespans, apart from few groups and mergers that have existed since 2011 and 2012 and have persisted at least until 2016, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra (aka Fatah al-Sham, Tahrir al-Sham), the Islamic State, Jaish al-Islam, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, and Ansar al-Sham. This finding is similar to anecdotal evidence from revolutions and other forms of contentious politics. Lichbach's application of the Collective Action (CA) Dilemma to rebel groups would suggest that their short lifespan is the normal case.[87] The Rebel's Dilemma (RD) is a problem armed groups face that seek the public good, the fall of a regime, and the creation of new order, but are confronted with a Prisoner's Dilemma, since it is rational, even for interested individuals, to stay home, and let others do the risky and expensive work of rebelling. Commensurate with Lichbach's theory, most groups have failed, and had to dissolve again, or shrank to irrelevance. Some of them have

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[86] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. 2012. Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for Eastern Syria. *The Guardian,* July 30, 2012. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/30/al-qaida-rebels-battle-syria (accessed May 26, 2017); Beaumont, Peter. 2013. Growing strength of Syria's Islamist groups undermines hopes of ousting Assad. *The Guardian*, December 14, 2013. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/14/syria-islamist-militants-growing-strength (accessed May 26, 2017); Macfarquhar, Neil and Hwaida Saad. 2012. As Syrian war drags on, Jihad gains foothold. *The New York Times*, July 29, 2012. Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/middleeast/as-syrian-war-drags-on-jihad-gains-foothold.html (accessed May 26, 2017); Sanger, David E. 2012. Jihadists receiving most arms sent to Syrian rebels. *The New York Times,* October 14, 2012. Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html (accessed May 26, 2017).
[87] Lichbach, Mark Irving. 1998. *The rebel's dilemma*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

also merged with other groups or found new ones (such as Liwa al-Tawhid, which helped form the Levant Front, or Suqour al-Sham and Liwa al-Haqq, which merged with Ahrar al-Sham). How do we explain these different organisational outcomes? Many answers to this question are practical (e.g. lack of funding, experience, overly strong opponents). However, answers can be framed theoretically as well: How are these empirical constraints filtered through the factor of organisation?

Starting from Kalyvas' assumption that civil wars are the product of both central lines of conflict ("grievances") and personal feuds ("greed"),[88] Schwab attempts to build a dynamic theoretical model capturing the different levels of interaction and conflict influencing the organisational dynamics within and among rebel groups. First of all, there is a main line of conflict (macro level), a fight between an incumbent and an opposition, which can consist of one or several armed actors. This level also captures transnational and international dynamics, such as foreign allies. The second level is constituted by the relationship between rebel groups (meso level), which can be characterised by more contentious as well as more harmonious constellations, and more cohesion or fragmentation of the rebel movement as a whole. The number of actors and the distribution of power, giving rise to unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar systems, analogue to the realist perspective in international relations, also influence the latter. Learning from cooperation and competition can play a role here. At a third level (micro), there are internal group processes, that is, dynamics along a continuum from more organisational cohesion to fragmentation. Here, learning from past (violent) mobilisation processes (e.g. the Islamist insurgency from 1976 until 1982) can influence organisational trajectories.

This empirical approach will involve mixed methods and rely on data and methodological triangulation. In order to trace the trajectories of specific groups and relationships between them, primary documents and declarations will be analysed and interviews with (former) group members and activists conducted.

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[88] Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2003. The ontology of 'political violence': action and identity in civil wars. *Perspectives on Politics* 1(03): 475–494.

Recruitment of Foreign Fighters to Violent Islamist Groups:
the cases of the Kyrgyz Republic and the United Kingdom
Almakan Orozobekova

The recruitment of foreign fighters has been crucial to the survival and development of violent Islamist groups and organisations in a dynamic environment. This can be seen from the exponential upsurge in recruitment since the beginning of the 21st century following the events of 9/11. Militant Islamist groups have been operating and developing in a context of an increasing number of conflicts worldwide. Adaptation to a new global environment and improved recruitment strategies have helped them to endure and enhance their capacity, to carry forward their activities, and to increase the number of their followers.

The aim of this research project is to look at the recruitment of individuals to violent Islamist entities with a focus on Kyrgyzstan and the United Kingdom. These two countries show that the flow of foreign fighters to violent Islamist groups/organisations has become a problem for different countries regardless of their social, economic, and political levels of development. In short, this research will attempt to 'identify' recruitment patterns specific to Kyrgyzstan and the UK. This will be done by exploring, firstly, the methods of recruitment of violent Islamist organisations and, secondly, the motivations of individuals to become recruited by and join these violent Islamist entities.

The recruitment methods and individual/group motivations both contribute equally to the recruitment process and help us to get a better understanding of the recruitment mechanism. These two aspects will be studied within the framework of the concept of adaption (which is composed of 1. agency – violent Islamist groups and their organisation's methods of recruitment – and 2. structure – 'contextual' factors that made individuals from Kyrgyzstan and the UK join violent Islamist groups, in other words motivating factors specific to individuals from two different contexts/structures). In sum, this will help to examine the following research questions: Firstly, how do violent Islamist groups recruit individuals from the Kyrgyz Republic and the United Kingdom? And secondly, why do individuals from the Kyrgyz Republic and the United Kingdom join/become recruited by violent Islamist groups (what are the motivating factors)?

The qualitative research project is realised through the collection of primary data by semi-structured interviews with former fighters, by analysis of social media platforms and jihadist websites and secondary data through the content analysis of the secondary sources. The semi-structured interviews will be conducted with former fighters in prisons, their families, friends, and colleagues. Also, the interviews will be carried out with the local experts, security officers, and journalists who are familiar with the fighters' cases. The collection of data will, furthermore, include a visit to the local court archives in order to learn about the cases of imprisoned fighters.

Decision-making in Insurgent Organisations:
the case of adopting suicide bombings
Katharina Siebert

This research project will address the decision-making processes of insurgent groups and especially focus on the question of whether or not to adopt a tactical innovation. The aim will be to discover the groups' respective motivations and beliefs underlying their decisions to adopt or reject the new technique.

So far, research on this topic mainly focused on external factors that might induce a group to resort to suicide bombings, e.g. competition among armed groups, the perceived occupation of the group's homeland, the population's support for the tactic or the need to compensate for their military weakness in an asymmetrical conflict situation. However, none of these factors can sufficiently explain why among insurgent groups that are subject to similar external factors and claim to represent the same constituency – some groups adopted while others rejected the tactic. The research project thus argues that adoption or rejection is not an automatic reaction to certain environmental influences that push an organisation in a particular direction, but the result of a strategic and rational decision by the group. This decision is based on the collective consciousness of the organisation consisting of the members' motivations and beliefs. While these are heavily influenced by the context the group operates in, it is more important to understand how insurgents perceive their environment and how they interpret the information they get than the actual presence or absence of a certain factor. It is therefore argued that differences between the groups' collective consciousnesses will be reflected in different decisions and activities.

It is astonishing that the existing literature treats insurgent groups like black boxes merely reacting to outside stimuli and that only very little research exists on their decision-making and their collective consciousnesses. This research project tries to close this gap by finding answers to the following questions: How do groups interpret the information they receive? How do they assess the environment and their situation? On which motivations and beliefs are their decisions based? What role do values, ideology, and self-perception play? How do the motivations and beliefs of leaders and followers differ? How do the groups evaluate success and failure? How do differences among the organisations with regard to the collective consciousness translate into different decisions? By opening up the black box, this research project attempts to shed light on the overall puzzle: Why did some insurgent groups adopt suicide bombings earlier than others and why did the latter revise their decision later on?

Box 3: Guests and Collaborations

Outreach: Collaboration with Halle's New Theatre, academic support for the play "Djihad Paradise"
Members of the research group conducted workshops with high school teachers and with high school students who had seen the play Djihad Paradise. An article on the group also appeared in the programme flyer. In this article myths about radicalisation and the role of religion in conflicts were debunked – an alternative view to the view of the dramatic advisor of the play. The group was also part of a radio interview about the premiere of the play, providing an academic context to the artistic aspects.

An international project with Will Pelfrey of Virginia Commonwealth University, who was a guest with the research group in summer 2016
The psychology of terrorist training camps versus military boot camps – indoctrination or resilience building
Abstract: Organisational ideology is a critical element of terrorist training, and many terrorist training units are predicated on the military model. There is a critical difference, however, in the underlying philosophy when terrorist and military training are contrasted. Military units cultivate resiliency while jihadist terrorist training units are predicated on religious principles. The sections of this manuscript review the literature on the practices and ideology of military and terrorist training. Next, a review of open source information and several case studies informs the constructs of training ideology. The divergence of terrorism and military ideology is then considered.

A project by Medinat Abdulazeez, University of Zurich, a joint guest to the Research Group "How 'Terrorists' Learn" and the Department of Integration and Conflict in summer/fall 2016
Down but not out: learning curves that sustain Boko Haram's existence
Abstract: Terrorist groups must be recurrently adaptive in order to survive. Boko Haram's longevity as the longest running terrorist group in Nigeria is hinged largely on the group's ability to learn from past mistakes, from other terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and from experiences of interacting with the Nigerian state. Acquiring knowledge on suicide bombings and explosive attacks from global Jihadi groups, after 2009, Boko Haram cemented their place in the realm of international terrorist organisations. With the state's belated political and military response, Boko Haram rode on the high-handedness of security operatives to attain palliative recognition in the eyes of the populace. The organisation's adaptive and innovative capabilities, which have allowed it to survive and remain a threat to the West African region, was the focus of this research project.

A Future beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

Carolin Görzig

The three context levels of learning (micro, meso, macro) are taken up in the individual as well as collaborative projects of the Research Group in different ways. While the quantitative research especially addresses the meso level, looking at learning among affiliating and merging groups, the PhD projects predominantly focus both on the micro level with a focus on organisational structures, decision-making, and recruitment strategies, and going beyond that level as well. The challenge in theory building is to integrate the different levels by, for example, differentiating between followers and leaders as in Almakan Orozobekova's project, by capturing the different levels of interaction and conflict influencing organisational dynamics within and between rebel groups, as in Regine Schwab's project, or asking, as does Katharina Siebert's project, how insurgents perceive their environment – a connection between the micro, meso, and macro levels. Furthermore, each project develops an individual conceptual approach that will be integrated into the wider framework in a subsequent step. Change, adaptation, and innovation are all processes that are different from but yet relate to learning. Benefiting from the conceptual wealth will inform our knowledge on learning processes and answer questions such as: When can we speak of learning and when of change, when does learning lead to adaptation, and is learning necessary for innovation?

In my own project I will address all three contextual levels in order to analyse the four waves of terrorism that David Rapoport proposed. According to Rapoport, terrorism occurs in waves and each wave comes with specific doctrines and technologies. The first wave of anarchists in the late 19th Century was followed by a second, anticolonial wave, the new left as a third wave, and the religious fourth wave that we are currently facing. By looking into mechanisms within terrorist organisations, among terrorist organisations, and between terrorist organisations and states, I aim to gain insights on what explains whether groups survive or disappear, learn or unlearn violence. Several groups, which I will investigate, persisted throughout different historical waves. Other groups disappeared after a short while.

Another goal of this research project is to foresee current and future developments. In order to achieve this I will analyse historical patterns of actions and reactions between terrorist groups and state terror. The four waves of terrorism can indeed be coupled with four waves of state terror: the anarchist wave with imperialism, the anti-colonial wave with colonialism, the new left with capitalism, and the religious wave with the war on terror. The conundrum between state terror and terrorism becomes even clearer when considering that non-state terrorism has been involved in the creation of states and that terrorism has been frequently turned into a legitimate

struggle.[89] The domination by states (the macro level)[90] goes hand in hand with the domination of violent non-state actors over its members and non-members (the micro level). The dominated can become a source of domination. For example, groups frequently provoke the state into repression in order to curb recruitment, the Red Army Faction (RAF) being a case in point.

When looking into the four waves of terrorism and state terror, one wonders what will come next: is globalisation a violent top-down process and are right-wing extremists a reaction to it, constituting a future wave of terrorism? While pondering the future of terrorism and state terror is a matter of speculation, the future of the Research Group will go beyond disciplinary boundaries. While right-wing extremism along with integration and radicalisation prevention are on the mid-term agenda of the Research Group, I will recruit two post-doc anthropologists in 2018 who can work to fully realise the potential of interdisciplinary research. Integration and migration are topics that easily lend themselves to ethnographic research and that can also be well connected to terrorism research. Refugees frequently suffer under state terror and non-state terrorism and can reveal insights into causes of migration.

Edmund Leach has noted that terrorist organisations are quite similar to the traditional small-scale units that anthropologists study.[91] With its origins in political science and the corresponding tendency towards categorisation, the Research Group can benefit from anthropological insight to take account of the complexity of social phenomena.[92] Günther Schlee writes that "people who are engaged in structuring their social universe in terms of similarities and difference, and in classifying themselves and others are not guided only by consideration of utility or costs and benefits."[93] While "[i]ncentives and disincentives, along with costs and benefits, only start to play a role in processes of identification – and in our theorising – if we move one step further,"[94] the Research Group's move beyond disciplinary boundaries will be constitutive of identification within the group as well as within the institute.

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[89] Goody, Jack. 2002. What is a terrorist. *History and Anthropology* 13(2): 139–143.

[90] Stephen Reyna writes about imperialism as a form of domination. See: Reyna, Stephen R. 2016. *Deadly contradictions: the new American Empire and global warring*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[91] Leach, Edmund. 1978. *Custom, law and terrorist violence*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[92] Schlee, Günther. 2014. In: *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Report* 2012–2013, p. 12: "However, naming categories and discussing relations among them or among things that are variously categorised does seem to be specifically human."

[93] Schlee, Günther. 2014. In: *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Report* 2012–2013, p. 13.

[94] Ibid.

Publications

Max Planck Research Group 'How 'Terrorists' Learn'

Books

Görzig, Carolin and Khaled Al-Hashimi. 2015. *Radicalization in Western Europe: integration and loss of identity among Muslim communities*. Contemporary Terrorism Studies. London; New York: Routledge.

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Hofmann, Claudia and **Carolin Görzig**. 2016. Influencing negotiation willingness in the Middle East: the potential contributions of private actors. *Negotiation Journal* 32 (2): 151–163. DOI: 10.1111/nejo.12152.

Articles in Journals

Orozobekova, Almakan. 2016. The mobilization and recruitment of foreign fighters: the case of Islamic State, 2012–2014. *Connections* 15 (3): 83–100. DOI: 10.11610/Connections.15.3.07.

Miscellaneous Publications

Görzig, Carolin and Claudia Hofmann. 2016. *The hurting way out: group cohesion and the mitigating potential of private actors in conflict negotiation*. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers 177. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

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Location of the Institute

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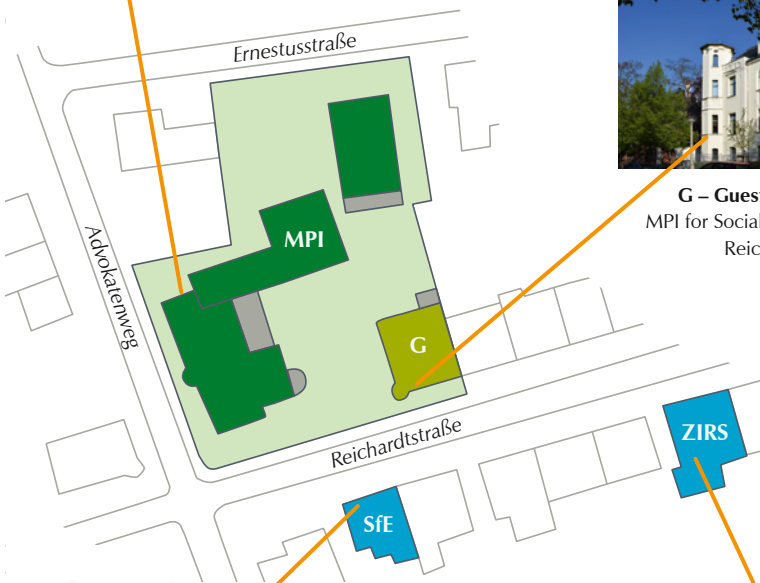
G – Guest House of the
MPI for Social Anthropology
Reichardtstraße 12

SfE – Seminar für Ethnologie
Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology
Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg
Reichardtstraße 11

ZIRS – Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Regionalstudien
Centre for Interdisciplinary Area Studies
Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg
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