

Commentary

How Terrorism Ends - Revisiting Cronin in Light of Contemporary Realities

Pierre Musa Halime Wessel¹⁵⁹⁹

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Abstract

This comment revisits Audrey Cronin's *How Terrorism Ends* (2009), arguing for the need to reassess key aspects of her framework in light of significant developments since its publication. First, it highlights how the availability of new data and research (especially following the unprecedented rise and fall in global terrorist activity in the 2010s) offers a valuable opportunity to re-examine patterns of terrorist decline. Second, it explores how changes in the nature of terrorism, such as the rise of far-right extremism and lone-actor violence in Western countries, as well as the evolving role of digital technologies, point to the limitations of Cronin's framework in today's context. The findings warrant a broader and updated inquiry into how terrorism ends today.

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¹⁵⁹⁹ Pierre Musa Halime Wessel is a PhD candidate in Criminology at the University of Cambridge. His research focuses on global perspectives of violence and violent extremism. In his doctoral work, he investigates reductions in terrorist violence through a mixed-methods approach.

I. Introduction

Cronin's *How Terrorism Ends*¹⁶⁰⁰ was first published in 2009 and received international praise as a well-researched account of terrorist decline and demise. It constitutes one of the most comprehensive typologies of its kind¹⁶⁰¹ and quickly became a landmark study for counterterrorism scholars.

Critics described the book as insightful and “frustrating for all the right reasons,”¹⁶⁰² noting its clear demonstration that terrorism defies simple solutions. Through a range of global case studies, Cronin offers a nuanced exploration of terrorist decline, highlighting the need to pursue incremental success over unattainable absolutes. Within this context, she references (e.g.) unrealistic expectations of quick success in negotiation processes¹⁶⁰³ or the reliance on brute force approaches as an unlikely cure-all for complex issues.¹⁶⁰⁴

Throughout the book, Cronin achieves several contributions. Two of them (Cronin's triad of terrorism and her typology of terrorist decline) are discussed in this comment.

II. Key Contributions

A. The Terrorist Triad

A central stance in *How Terrorism Ends* is Cronin's challenge of the relationship between terrorist groups and their target governments as a dichotomy. She introduces the concept of the “triad of terrorism,”¹⁶⁰⁵ positing that a key third party in the struggle between terrorists and governments is the general populace or “audience.”¹⁶⁰⁶

Following the likes of Siqueira and Sandler,¹⁶⁰⁷ Cronin describes a competition

¹⁶⁰⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400831142>.

¹⁶⁰¹ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691152394/how-terrorism-ends>.

¹⁶⁰² Eric Shibuya, review of *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, by Audrey Kurth Cronin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 62 (3rd Quarter 2011): 134–135, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-62/jfq-62_134_Shibuya.pdf.

¹⁶⁰³ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, “Negotiations: Transition Toward a Legitimate Political Process,” 35–72.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, “Repression: Crushing Terrorism with Force,” 115–145.

¹⁶⁰⁵ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 7.

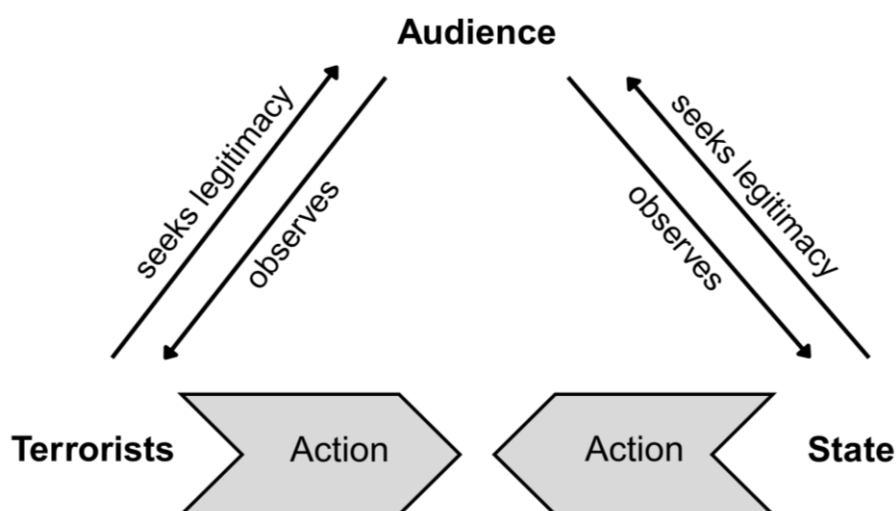
¹⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰⁷ Kevin Siqueira and Todd Sandler, “Terrorists versus the Government: Strategic Interaction, Support, and Sponsorship,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 6 (2006): 878–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706293469>.

between terrorist groups and governments for legitimacy among the audience, with governments aiming to uphold the status quo, and terrorist groups challenging it. The audience is presented as a key actor in determining the outcome of this struggle as both parties rely on it for popular support. Thus, the ultimate success or failure of terrorist campaigns is argued not to depend solely on the actions of states or terrorists, but, crucially, on how observers interpret and respond to them.

This triangular relationship is highlighted throughout the book at the example of the Hamas and the polarising effects of Israeli counterterrorism activities. Cronin describes how, provoked by attacks, the Israeli government has engaged in counter strikes against Palestinian targets that conflict with international law,¹⁶⁰⁸ eroding Israel's legitimacy among Palestinians, as well as parts of the international community. She posits that to provoke brute-force aggression in governments may well be part of a terrorist group's strategy to de-legitimise their opponent and earn legitimacy among those targeted. Finally, she concludes that Hamas' increasing popularity since the 1990s may have been the result of Israeli countermeasures, saying that they have "drawn recruits to terrorist organisations."¹⁶⁰⁹

Figure 1: Proposed Visualisation of Cronin's Terrorist Triad



Cronin's example shows that the audience is a key actor, as both terrorist groups and target governments take actions to legitimise themselves or delegitimise each other in the audience's eyes. Today, 16 years after Cronin's observation, the conflict between Israel and Hamas can be observed in its extremes, with both sides now vying for a

¹⁶⁰⁸ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 30.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 31.

global audience's legitimacy.

B. Typology of Terrorist Demise

With the terrorist triad in mind, Cronin theorises 6 ways terrorist campaigns may end. These include *Decapitation* (campaigns ending through the removal of group leadership, either by capture or assassination);¹⁶¹⁰ *Negotiation* (campaigns ending through dialogue and compromise),¹⁶¹¹ *Success* (campaigns ending through the achievement of strategic or political goals),¹⁶¹² *Failure* (campaigns ending through loss of support, non-achievement of objectives, or internal collapse),¹⁶¹³ *Repression* (campaigns ending through brute-force intervention),¹⁶¹⁴ and *Reorientation* (campaigns ending through transitions to other causes or activities).¹⁶¹⁵

Key points from Cronin's analysis provide insights that challenge standard counterterrorism practices, particularly those rooted in the post-9/11 global 'war on terror'¹⁶¹⁶. For instance, governments have traditionally targeted terrorist leaders to end their campaigns (*Decapitation*), a tactic emblematic of the war on terror's reliance on brute force and motives of retaliation.¹⁶¹⁷ Cronin acknowledges the pressures driving these actions, noting that governments aim to 'demonstrate resolve'¹⁶¹⁸ and hope to weaken a group's ideological and organisational functions by removing its leader. However, she presents evidence that refutes expectations of a linear outcome from leadership decapitation. A resulting fractionalisation or the emergence of a new, more

¹⁶¹⁰ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Decapitation: Catching or Killing the Leader," 14–34.

¹⁶¹¹ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Negotiations: Transition Toward a Legitimate Political Process," 35–72.

¹⁶¹² Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Success: Achieving the Objective," 73–93.

¹⁶¹³ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Failure: Imploding, Provoking a Backlash, or Becoming Marginalized," 94–114.

¹⁶¹⁴ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Repression: Crushing Terrorism with Force," 115–145.

¹⁶¹⁵ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Reorientation: Transitioning to Another Modus Operandi," 146–166.

¹⁶¹⁶ Erik W. Goepner, "Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (2016): 107, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2828&context=parameters>.

¹⁶¹⁷ See Grace Elizabeth Powell, *Endless Kill List, Endless War: High Value Targeting and the War on Terror* (BA thesis, Wesleyan University, 2014), 7, 51, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=a47c46873c192a4e140c34583442ff649e4f584a>; Robert Mandel, *Coercing Compliance: State-Initiated Brute Force in Today's World* (Stanford University Press, 2015), <https://www.sup.org/books/politics/coercing-compliance>; William Pfaff, *Fear, Anger and Failure: A Chronicle of the Bush Administration's War Against Terror from the Attacks in September 2001 to Defeat in Baghdad* (Algora Publishing, 2004), <https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/record/166499>; Stephen J. Cimbala, "Military Persuasion, Intelligence and the War on Terror," *Defense & Security Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2006): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751790600577157>.

¹⁶¹⁸ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 16.

brutal leader can lead to unintended negative consequences of the intervention.¹⁶¹⁹

By considering factors such as popular support or inner-group dynamics, she argues that leadership removal is a risky gamble, with its success being heavily dependent on the group's reliance on its leader for survival.¹⁶²⁰ Cronin further emphasizes that social factors like group cohesion among terrorists and audience dynamics often outweigh political objectives, advocating for dispassionate approaches to counterterrorism that reflect a deep understanding of the target's position in wider structural, social and political contexts. By recognising that terrorism is not purely driven by political and strategic goals, but further exists and develops in a social environment, Cronin's work aligns with a new school of counterterrorism scholars who favour holistic assessment over purely strategic mission-focused approaches.¹⁶²¹

In later years, her assessment found widespread support among counterterrorism scholars as emerging evidence further validated her findings. For instance, Jenna Jordan,¹⁶²² expanded on Cronin's work by assessing over a thousand cases of leadership removal in 2019. Her findings widely reflect those of Cronin: evidence for the success of decapitation is mixed, and factors such group size, structure, and ideological commitment, determine the likelihood of success. Jordan's work does not outright disprove any of Cronin's findings, however, adds nuance in some places. For example, using contemporary data, Jordan finds that leadership targeting is often ineffective and may even strengthen groups by increasing radicalisation and violence.¹⁶²³ Jadoon et al. furthered this inquiry, finding that targeting lower-tier leaders can lead to loss of control over foot soldiers and more indiscriminate violence.¹⁶²⁴ This shows that while Cronin's work remains relevant, the observation of more recent developments and collection of new data allows scholars to refine and update Cronin's model.

III. Revisiting Cronin in Light of Recent Developments

¹⁶¹⁹ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, "Decapitation: Catching or Killing the Leader," 14–34.

¹⁶²⁰ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 31.

¹⁶²¹ Max Abrahms, "How Terrorism Ends," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 85, <https://cdn-mef.meforum.org/26/14/7ce8cf4f9ffa4cb1b3ee6eb561b6/2797.pdf>.

¹⁶²² Jenna Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations* (Stanford University Press, 2019), <https://www.sup.org/books/politics/leadership-decapitation>.

¹⁶²³ Ibid.

¹⁶²⁴ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Daniel Milton, "Targeting Quality or Quantity? The Divergent Effects of Targeting Upper versus Lower-Tier Leaders of Militant Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, no. 5 (2023): 1007–1031, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221126080>.

Sixteen years after the publication of *How Terrorism Ends*, it is a good moment to revisit Cronin's framework. First, the empirical landscape of terrorism studies has advanced significantly, with a new availability of data and research opening new possibilities. Second, the nature of terrorism has changed, calling for reinvestigation.

A. New Availability of Terrorism Data and Research

The data landscape around terrorism has changed significantly since 2009. Cronin's research for *How Terrorism Ends* was based on numerous collections of data. Statistical observations were predominantly based on data from the RAND-MIPT Knowledge Base,¹⁶²⁵ a now no longer maintained source of terrorist attack data. Researchers today have access to data collections such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).¹⁶²⁶ The GTD is the largest unclassified repository of terrorist attack data available to this date.¹⁶²⁷ Over 200,000 incidents are documented between 1970 to 2021, with each entry featuring up to 137 variables.¹⁶²⁸

Some of these variables were included in previous datasets such as the RAND-MIPT Knowledgebase, however, are now recorded in much more detail. For instance, the GTD documents each incident's attack location by world region, country, state, city, latitude and longitude. By recording extensive variables, the GTD allows researchers to examine terrorist attacks in greater depth.

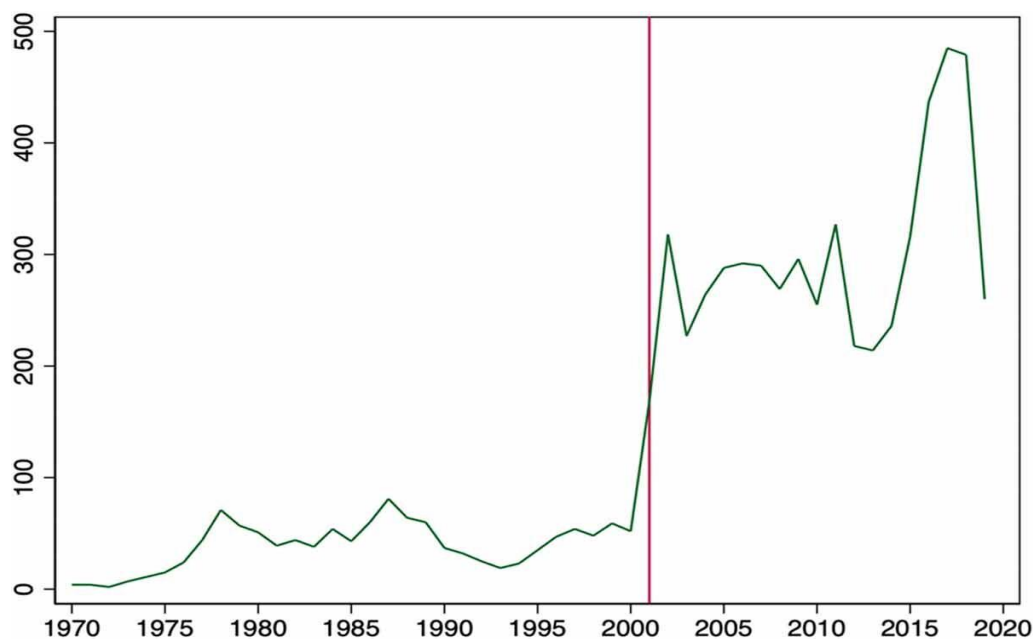
Figure 2: Articles Published on Terrorism Per Year 1970-2019

¹⁶²⁵ RAND Corporation, *Terrorism Incidents Knowledgebase*, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents/about.html>.

¹⁶²⁶ START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism), *Global Terrorism Database (GTD)* (University of Maryland, 2025), <https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/GTD>.

¹⁶²⁷ Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller, *Putting Terrorism in Context: Lessons From the Global Terrorism Database* (Routledge, 2014), 18, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315881720>.

¹⁶²⁸ START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism), *Global Terrorism Database [data files]* (University of Maryland, 2021), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd-download>.



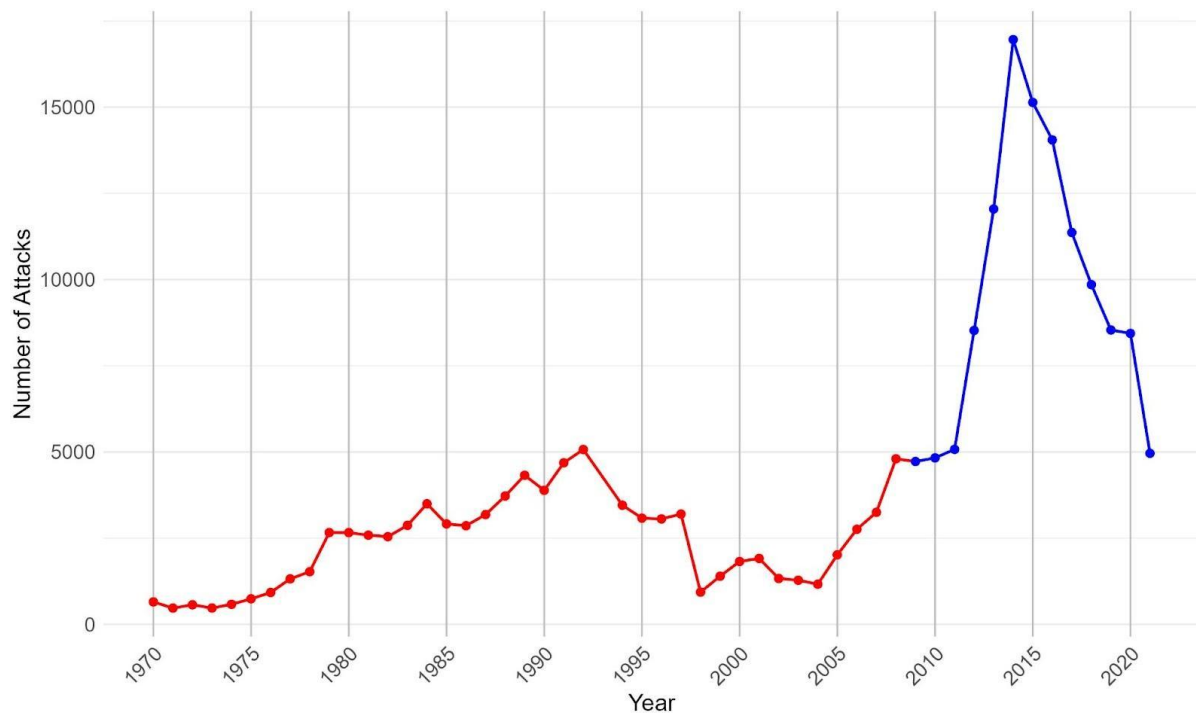
(Phillips, 2023)

Further, terrorism research has evolved significantly since 2009. Figure 2, created by Brian Phillips, tracks the use of “terrorist” or “terrorism” in academic titles over time using Web of Science data.¹⁶²⁹ Phillips used it to illustrate the surge in terrorism studies after the 9/11 attacks (marked by a vertical line). Notably, the highest annual number of publications occurred after Cronin’s 2009 *How Terrorism Ends*. With a new body of literature and extensive data collections like the GTD available, researchers today are well positioned to reassess typologies of terrorist decline and demise in contemporary contexts.

Another factor warranting a reassessment of Cronin’s typology is the dramatic shift in the trajectory of global terrorist attacks since her book’s publication. Most notably, global terrorist acts surged to an all-time high in the 2010s, peaking in 2014. Figure 3, based on GTD data, illustrates this sharp rise and the recent decline. It is important to note that the data only extends to June 2021, thus, the final year on the graph represents just six months of records. This should be considered when interpreting the apparent decline in that period. Nevertheless, a sharp fall is evident after 2014.

Figure 3: Number of Terrorist Attacks 1970-2021

¹⁶²⁹ Brian J. Phillips, "How Did 9/11 Affect Terrorism Research? Examining Articles and Authors, 1970–2019," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (2023): 411, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2021.1935889>.

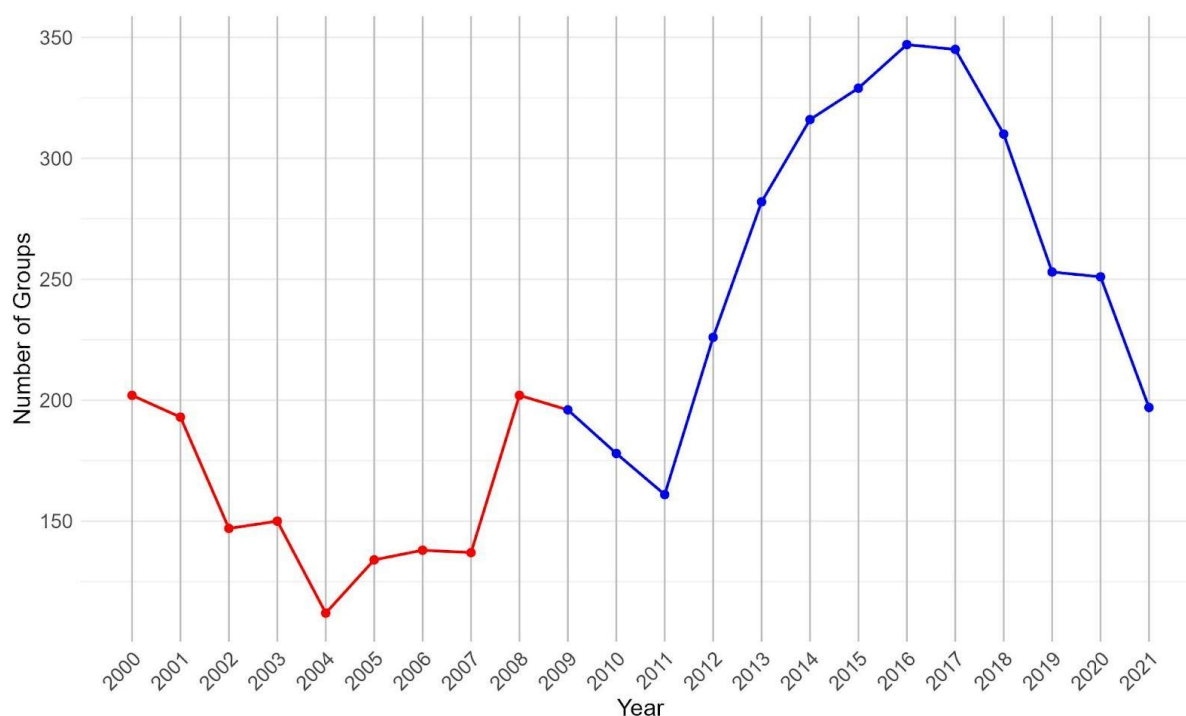


Based on GTD Data (START, 2025)

At the time of Cronin's publication, notable fluctuations in terrorist activity had already occurred, which she explores through detailed case studies. However, the sharp rise in attacks from 2010 to 2014, followed by a steep decline, marks historically unprecedented trends. These developments offer a unique opportunity to study terrorist decline. What caused the sudden drop in attacks? What can it reveal about how terrorism ends? And can this historic downturn help refine typologies of terrorist decline and demise?

Moreover, since Cronin's observations, many new groups have formed and delivered impactful assaults on democracies worldwide. Figure 4 shows an increase in unique active groups recorded, peaking in 2016, with a subsequent decline, broadly mirroring attack trends.

Figure 4: Number of Unique Active Terrorist Groups per Year 2000-2020



Based on GTD Data (START, 2025)

The marked decline in unique active groups per year suggests that many terrorist organisations have ended in recent years, reinforcing the unique opportunity to study terrorist decline today. What are the conditions under which groups decline or end today? Do these conditions differ compared to the early 2000s?

B. The Shifting Landscape of Terrorism

Since 2009, terrorism has taken on new forms that fall outside the scope of Cronin's original focus.

For instance, there has been a significant rise in far-right terrorism in western democracies in the past decade, with numbers in fascist attacks increasing significantly.¹⁶³⁰ Alongside prevailing Islamist ideologies, far-right extremism is now among the most prevalent ideologies in the global North¹⁶³¹ and poses a severe threat to democratic systems.¹⁶³²

Within *How Terrorism Ends*, few short mentions are made of right-wing terrorist

¹⁶³⁰ Jonathan Collins, "A New Wave of Terrorism? A Comparative Analysis of the Rise of Far-Right Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 6 (2021): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27090913>.

¹⁶³¹ Syed Shehzad Ali, "Far-Right Extremism in Europe," *Journal of European Studies (JES)* 37, no. 1 (2021): 121, <https://asce-uok.edu.pk/journal/index.php/JES/article/view/171>.

¹⁶³² Milan W. Svolik, Elena Avramovska, Johanna Lutz, and Filip Milačić, "In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 7, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/875795>.

groups.¹⁶³³ The main focus of Cronin's explorations is on Islamist groups and diverse examples of separatist, left-wing, or Maoist groups. Except for the Irish Republican Army and the Northern Irish peace process, case studies illustrating her six types of terrorist demise largely focus on terrorist groups outside of Europe or North America. In the light of a steep rise in far-right terrorist attacks in those regions, new questions arise about how terrorism ends. For example: How does right-wing terrorism end? How would the repression or decapitation of a terrorist group look like in e.g. Europe?

Another key development is an unprecedented increase in lone-actor terrorist attacks. Over 90 percent of fatal terrorist attacks in the West in the past five years have been carried out by lone actors.¹⁶³⁴ The Global Terrorism Index 2025 reports that "these attacks are typically carried out by youths [...] who have no formal ties to terrorist organisations."¹⁶³⁵ Lone-actor terrorism is either inspired by existing groups or driven by self-constructed hybrid ideologies pieced together from diverse, sometimes opposing, belief systems to justify violence.¹⁶³⁶

Cronin's work focuses exclusively on the trajectories of terrorist campaigns, with her observations and typology constructing how terrorism declines in groups specifically. At the time of Cronin's writing, terrorism in the West was more popularly known to be a threat emanating from groups, with impactful attacks in the West (such as the 2004 train bombings in Madrid,¹⁶³⁷ or the 2015 Paris concert assaults¹⁶³⁸) being orchestrated by well-organised foreign extremist adversaries. Now, however, the main terrorist threat for western countries are lone actors, for whom Cronin's framework does not account. Thus, a contemporary answer to the question of how terrorism ends must go beyond explanations of how the campaigns of terrorist groups end.

Lastly, global digitalisation and rapid advancements in the technology sector have reshaped the way terrorism develops and operates. Within the context of Cronin's key

¹⁶³³ See Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 96, 98, 112.

¹⁶³⁴ Vision of Humanity, "Evolving Threat of Lone Wolf Terrorism in the West," *Vision of Humanity*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/evolving-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-the-west/>.

¹⁶³⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025), 2, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

¹⁶³⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹⁶³⁷ William Rose, Rysia Murphy, and Max Abrahms, "Does Terrorism Ever Work? The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 185, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30129805>.

¹⁶³⁸ Mathieu Raux et al., "Analysis of the Medical Response to November 2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks: Resource Utilization According to the Cause of Injury," *Intensive Care Medicine* 45 (2019): 1232, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00134-019-05724-9>.

contributions, it pays to consider the impact of social media on how terrorists and other extremist actors now engage audiences as a key part of the triad of terrorism.

Since the publication of *How Terrorism Ends*, the nature of social interactions has fundamentally changed. In large part, most people now interact with others virtually, whether it is in the workspace or in their free time. Online portals provide spaces for disinformation and propaganda for notable terrorist groups such as ISIL (Da'esh),¹⁶³⁹ fuelling extremist ideologies and extending the arm of terrorist recruiters into people's homes.¹⁶⁴⁰ Social media algorithms favour extreme content and tend to recommend material that reinforces users' existing beliefs, creating echo chambers and radicalisation spaces.¹⁶⁴¹

Beyond recruitment, there has been a notable shift in public discourse on terrorism and its combat. Opinions are increasingly polarized, and information shared in online spaces often intensify the debate. For example: After the 2024 Southport stabbings, disinformation about the incident shared in online forums sparked nation-wide violent protests by the far right and other individuals inspired by their outrage.¹⁶⁴²

Further, international conflicts (including those between terrorist groups and their target governments) have also become more divisive, with state actors, non-state armed groups, and other political stakeholders using digital platforms to disseminate competing narratives. These developments highlight the continued relevance of Cronin's terrorist triad, where the audience remains a key player in the struggle for legitimacy. In an era where information spreads rapidly and reaches people who may not engage with traditional media, the audience's role has arguably become more influential than ever.

It seems, however, that in a globalised world, more parties than just terrorists and their target governments stand to gain from influencing the audience. The example of the Southport riots illustrates that external extremist adversaries seek to exploit unrelated

¹⁶³⁹ James A. Piazza, "Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15, no. 1 (2022): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2021.1895263>.

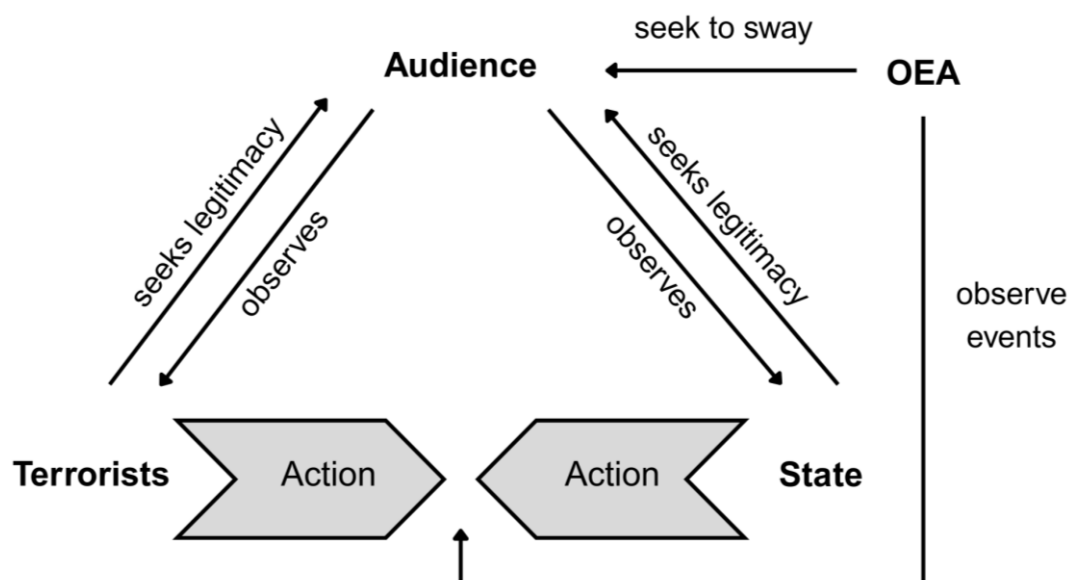
¹⁶⁴⁰ Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media," *Society* 54, no. 2 (2017): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0>; Gabriel Weimann, "The Emerging Role of Social Media in the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters," in *Foreign Fighters Under International Law and Beyond* (2016): 77, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-099-2_6.

¹⁶⁴¹ Ermelinda Rodilosso, "Filter Bubbles and the Unfeeling: How AI for Social Media Can Foster Extremism and Polarization," *Philosophy & Technology* 37, no. 2 (2024): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-024-00758-4>.

¹⁶⁴² "Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation?," *Al Jazeera*, August 2, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/2/southport-stabbing-what-led-to-the-spread-of-disinformation>.

conflicts to further their own cause among a shared audience. Scholars could consider adding to the terrorist triad, accordingly, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Proposed Addition of “Other Extremist Adversaries” (OEA) to Cronin’s Triad of Terrorism



IV. Conclusion

Cronin’s *How Terrorism Ends* has proven relevant for over a decade and a half, with scholars continually building on her work. Two key contributions are her triad of terrorism and six types of terrorist decline and demise.

Today, there is a unique opportunity to revisit Cronin’s work, based on the availability of new data and research. Since the publication of *How Terrorism Ends*, both the sharpest rise and the most significant decline in recorded terrorist attacks have taken place, creating new opportunities to examine how terrorism ends today.

Further, reflecting on changes in the nature of terrorism has produced the insight that Cronin’s framework falls short of explaining some of the most recent developments. First, the rise of far-right terrorism in Western democracies highlights the need to revisit Cronin’s framework in light of evolving threats. Understanding how terrorism ends today calls for extending her analysis to account for ideological and regional developments that have occurred since her book was published.

Second, the growing prevalence of lone-actor terrorism also points to a limitation of Cronin’s framework, which was built around the decline of organised terrorist groups. Understanding how terrorism ends today requires expanding the scope to include

forms of violence that operate outside traditional group structures.

Last, technological advances allow terrorists and those who combat them to engage global audiences in new ways, reaffirming the importance of the audience in Cronin's terrorist triad. Recent developments, however, suggested that scholars could add to the concept.

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