SPECIAL SECTION

Bringing politics back in: the introduction of the ‘performative power’ of counterterrorism

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While it is sensible that governments and academics endeavour to assess the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies, this article argues that it is almost impossible to measure arithmetically the outcome of counterterrorism efforts for a variety of reasons. However, this does not mean that the effect of governmental policy cannot and should not be assessed. This article argues that it is not necessarily the policy measures and their intended results as such, but much more the way in which they are presented and perceived, that determine the overall effect of the policy in question. The article introduces the concept of ‘performativity’, which involves the extent to which a national government, by means of its official counterterrorism policy and corresponding discourse, is successful in selling its representation of events, its set of solutions to the terrorist problem, as well as being able to set the tone for the overall discourse on terrorism and counterterrorism. Due to the distinct relation between the performative power of counterterrorism efforts and the arc of violence carried out by terrorist movements, analysing the level of performativity will provide an indication to the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies. It is argued that a low level of performative power generally has a more rapidly neutralising effect on radicalisation and political violence than large-scale, public counterterrorism efforts.

Keywords: counterterrorism; effectiveness; performativity; performative power; politicisation; framing; mobilisation

Introduction

This article will first address the question of why evaluating the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures is so difficult, looking at it mainly from the viewpoint of the intelligence and security services. Subsequently, we argue that it is generally very difficult to prove the positive effects of counterterrorism policies, especially in such ways that are easily captured in numbers. Instead, we will introduce the concept of the ‘performativity’, or ‘the performative power’ of counterterrorism, to depict the importance of political choices made during the process of countering terrorism. We argue that it may be the way in which the process is conducted rather than the possible outcomes of that process that matters the most. Finally, we will conclude by stating that there are alternatives to counterterrorism policies that aim to demonstrate state power or to mobilise the society at large. Such policies may unwittingly contribute to new frames of injustice for the terrorists and their supporters or

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undermine democratic legitimacy. Instead, we propose a modest approach that is based on continuous evaluation of the impact that every step taken has, acknowledging that there are multiple audiences that may react very differently.

Why it is so difficult to assess the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies
(15 answers)

We start with the hundred million dollar question. How do we know what really works in the fight against terrorism? The answer to this question seems critically important. First of all, because a lot of money is being spent on counterterrorism, even to the extent that governments may begin to outspend themselves. Partly because of the financial costs involved, parliamentarians in several countries, amongst them the Netherlands, have been demanding evaluations of the antiterrorism legislation enacted since 9/11 (Ungerer et al. 2008). A second reason is that people want to know where we stand in the fight against terrorism. Are we making any progress towards victory? Or are we still losing? Furthermore, counterradicalisation and counterterrorism measures can easily become counterproductive (Silke 2005, Policy Exchange 2007). Terrorism is a way of (violent) agenda-setting; are governments not in fact helping terrorists to establish their goals by paying so much attention to terrorism by way of countermeasures or by exaggerating risks and pandering to public fears (Mueller 2005a, p. 494, Mueller 2005b)? Are governments not creating heroes and martyrs out of terrorists, for instance, by sending them to prison? Are they not eroding exactly those civil liberties and values on which they pride themselves vis-à-vis the terrorists? After all, better insight into the degree of success or failure is relevant also because it generally touches upon questions of achievement of the government, its legitimacy and its credibility; exactly those things that terrorists are trying to undermine. Hence, if governments are not able to establish whether their measures are successful, they may play into the hands of the terrorists.

Whilst answering the question of the effectiveness is of such an overriding importance, it is surprising that we actually know very little about the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies. Of course, there are some sympathetic sounding recommendations to be found in counterterrorism handbooks, such as good intelligence, frankness towards the public, dealing with root causes, ‘firm resolve, even ruthlessness’ towards terrorists, international cooperation, smooth coordination of counterterrorism policies and agencies, and clemency policies (e.g. Woolsey 2002, p. v). In these same handbooks, one can also find guidance on what does not work, such as brutality towards the civilian population, insensitivity to the need for reforms, rigid and inflexible tactics, and intragovernmental rivalries (Woolsey 2002, p. vi, Ganor 2005, Morag 2005). However, what is often overlooked is that what may work in one case, may not necessarily work elsewhere. Simply copying policies from abroad may cause a rude awakening for firm believers in the possibility of transplanting and adopting so-called best practices. To give one example, clemency policies or offers to start negotiations with terrorists may in one case bring them to the negotiating table, whereas in another context the terrorists may see it as a sign of weakness and therefore intensify their violent campaign.

How can governments lack the proper instruments to measure success in the fight against terrorism? We will try to answer this question from the perspective of public administration studies, which enables us more easily to transfer our scholarly views into a policy-oriented outlook. Thus, we discern five major problem areas, further divided into fifteen reasons for the difficulty to measure policy effectiveness. These are the nature of the problem of terrorism itself (reasons 1 and 2); the objectives of countering terrorism
(reasons 3–7); measurement problems (reasons 8–12); the question of context (reasons 13 and 14); and finally timing (reason 15).

**The nature of the problem: what is and what causes terrorism?**

Firstly, it usually holds true that in order to solve a problem, one has to know what the problem is. But the definition of the problem, in this case terrorism, is a problem in itself. There are hundreds of definitions (Schmid and Jongman 1988) and at least five major categories in which a government can perceive the problem of terrorism: as a form of war, a criminal problem, an issue of national security or a threat to the democratic order and process, a societal problem, or a problem of safety and security in a stricter sense. If authorities do not agree upon what constitutes terrorism, one can hardly expect that it will be fought effectively.

Secondly, just as there are definitional problems, there is little agreement as to what causes terrorism (e.g. Bjørgo 2005, Richardson 2006). Some observers focus on so-called root causes like humiliation or economic distress, while others see the causes more or less as a result of the way the state interacts with certain groups in society or in other nations. Even if there would be agreement among, say, academics as to what make terrorists ‘tick’, many policy-makers disregard academic findings. A famous example is that time and again academic research indicates that poverty and lack of education are not among the real causes of terrorism; nevertheless, many good-willing politicians continue to claim that these matters are primary causes (Krueger and Maleckova 2003, Engene 2004, pp. 88, 168–169, Berrebi 2007).

**The objectives of counterterrorism: what do counterterrorism policy-makers want?**

Fighting terrorism also raises the question of whether its prime objective should be to take away the fear of ‘our own people’ or to win over the hearts and minds of ‘the others’. Personally, we would argue that counterterrorism should focus on achieving both; we should be conscious of single-mindedness. Counterterrorism policy-makers should not be either on the defence or on the offence, like in American football, using different teams for both, but they should reason and act like chess-players, thinking simultaneously along both lines. Even so, it will not always be easy to discern offence from defence. The fact that a terrorist is set free after a court trial could be perceived as a defeat from the prosecutor’s standpoint. However, from the perspective of counterterrorism policy more generally, it could mean a significant gain, since it may demonstrate to (potential) terrorists and their supporters that the judicial system is much fairer than they might have thought.

Fourthly, if success in the fight against terrorism is determined by the degree to which terrorists’ behaviour is influenced, counterterrorism policy-makers would do well to gain a good understanding of what the objectives of the terrorists are. Too often, policies seem to be guided by the oversimplified thought that what constitutes a victory for one party amounts to defeat for the other. This may not necessarily be the case. Too little attention is paid to what constitutes victory and defeat from the viewpoint of the terrorists. Is it their goal to bomb the government to the negotiating table? Or do they simply mean to scare the people by creating havoc? Unsurprisingly, these goals differ per context and per terrorist organisation, and should be analysed as such.

The manner in which terrorists have organised themselves is another important evaluation that governments need to make in order to formulate a clear and assessable objective.
of their counterterrorism policies. In the case of a hierarchical organisation, taking out the leadership may be a successful counterterrorism measure, as was proven in the case of the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso and its leader Abimael Guzman. However, if the terrorists have organised themselves in more or less segmented, polycentric, integrated networks such as the jihadi movement in general and al-Qaeda in particular, the elimination of Osama bin Laden may have little effect upon the resilience of the terrorists and their networks (Kurth Cronin 2008, p. 56). The manner in which a terrorist group has organised itself must be clear from the outset of new counterterrorism policy, in order to formulate an appropriate objective and be able to judge its success.

Sixth, another critical element in assessing effectiveness is the fact that government policies do not always have the same effect on every citizen. Take for instance repressive measures used in a rather early stage of radicalisation. They may lead some radicalising youngsters to deviate from the path to political violence, whilst it might strengthen the conviction of others, often those constituting the hard core, that only violence works against the government and that the government’s repression provides them with the injustice frame they need to legitimise their actions (Lichbach 1987, Demant et al. 2008). Another example is an improvement in educational facilities for people that are excluded or perceive themselves to be so. Of this group, 99.5% may enjoy its new opportunities and see it as a very successful policy of emancipation. The remaining 0.5%, however, may use its newly acquired knowledge to absorb fanatical ideologies or start fearing that although educational opportunities are improved it will be very difficult to find a suitable job, which may lead to increased feelings of exclusion and radicalisation. For terrorist organisations, what counts is hardly ever those 99.5%, but that tiny fraction that feels dissatisfied and discriminated against. Consequently, a good counterradicalisation or counterterrorism policy should always at least be double-pronged: addressing both the (potential) extremists or terrorists themselves and the larger community from which they stem. Ideally, it should also take into account the impact it will have on the population at large. Without doing so, even a well-intending government may become part of the problem rather than the solution. It is important to emphasise that even after the large-scale terrorist attacks of the past decade, many more people are likely to be negatively affected by counterterrorism measures than by terrorism itself (Furedi 2007, p. 158).

In the seventh place, we have to ask ourselves: Do we measure results in terms of improvements of the existing situation or do we try to establish whether a government is approaching more or less an ideal democratic society in which there are few reasons left for violent opposition? This question brings the ethical component into the equation. Suppose that a totalitarian approach would diminish terrorism to zero, the question is whether we would appreciate such a ‘solution’. A society and its politicians have to decide for instance how many people can be kept simultaneously under surveillance before turning itself into a police, surveillance, data or intelligence state or alternatively take the risk of losing sight of some potential terrorists (Vedder et al. 2007, Adviescommissie Informatiestromen Veiligheid 2007, van Dijk 2008, Koops 2008, Anderson et al. 2009, Kuitenbrouwer 2009, NRC Handelsblad 2009b). Such dilemmas demonstrate unmistakably that the question of the effectiveness of counterradicalisation and counterterrorism policies cannot be addressed in a value-free vacuum and can never be raised without addressing ethical considerations as well (Chalk 1995, Meggle 2005, Honderich 2003). There is no such thing as effectiveness at any costs, at least not in a democratic society where the rule of law is applied. Measuring counterterrorism’s effectiveness can therefore never be a question of simple arithmetic.
Problems of measurement: what do we count as a success?

When we turn to the actual measurement, the first question is: how do we measure success? In terms of results? But what constitutes a result? By defining terrorism in a particular way, policy-makers may be setting their own standards for success. However, many counterterrorism handbooks and articles do not utilise such sophisticated ideas about terms of measurement. Quite often, they talk of success simply in terms of a reduction, be it a reduction in the numbers of terrorist incidents, the number of terrorist groups, the number of terrorists, the number of victims or the amount of damage. But how can one be certain that any occurring reduction is a direct consequence of the counterterrorism policies in place? There can be numerous other reasons for it: terrorism campaigns go out of fashion, the particular group of terrorists has reached a certain age in which they decide to refrain from using violence, etc.

Furthermore, in the field of counterterrorism, the primary question is not how many terrorists you eliminate, for instance by killing them or by sending them to prison, but whether you increase their numbers through the policies and strategies you use. One has also to take into account that elimination of risks in certain places may cause substitution or waterbed effects. If Schiphol Airport near the city of Amsterdam is hardened as a target, terrorists may decide to attack Brussels Airport. From a national point of view, the fact that Schiphol Airport is not attacked would be a success. From a European standpoint, nothing would have been gained.

In the tenth place: One could also wonder what kind of reduction of terrorist activity guarantees security in a time when the chance of a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) attack is more than just a remote possibility. If the number of attacks decreases from thirty attacks a year based upon the use of explosive devices that cause relatively minor damage to one attack a year using a CBRN weapon, should that be considered a success? A simple reduction in numbers is not the be-all and end-all of counterterrorism policy.

Moreover, it is much more important to realise that terrorism is not only about attacks; it is mainly about creating fear. The mere threat of an imminent attack may create enough fear to call terrorism a successful strategy (Mueller 2005a, p. 497). Consequently, should we not only measure objective facts such as the number of attacks or number of victims, but also changes in people’s perception or people’s behaviour (Mueller 2005a, p. 499, Abadie and Gardeazbal 2008)? How would one define a situation in which the United States has been able to kill or arrest many of al-Qaeda’s members and sharply decrease the organisation’s freedom of movement, but a majority of the people worldwide believe that al-Qaeda has improved its position or at least withstood the American pressure; is this success or failure? This is not just hypothetical: these are the actual trends found in public opinion polls. In a fall 2008 poll conducted for the BBC World Service in 23 countries, on average only 22% of the interviewees said to believe that al-Qaeda has been weakened by the ‘War on Terror’, whilst 29% believed that it has had no effect and 30% thought it only made al-Qaeda stronger (World Public Opinion 2009).

In fact, employing arithmetic to determine the effects of counterterrorism measures is hardly possible at all, because both terrorists and counterterrorism policy-makers are, most often deliberately, not transparent when it comes to the real figures. Both parties have very good reasons to keep their successes and failures secret, at least for a certain amount of time. Thus, even if all the previous premonitions do not convince individuals of the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies, the fact that access to the actual raw data is limited, and the data itself is incomplete, surely must.
Context matters

A 13th reason for the difficulty of measuring policy effectiveness is the influence of context. The assumption that measures have the same effect everywhere, independent of the geographical space a terrorist group operates in – nationally, regionally, internationally, transnationally – is highly questionable. It is sometimes assumed that counterinsurgency measures can be transferred to the global level, defined as Global Counterinsurgency (or GCOIN) (Hoffman 2009). However, as important as concerted initiatives to develop sound COIN strategies are, they almost by definition depend on intense knowledge of the local situation. A GCOIN strategy should therefore always be connected and translated to different regional and local tactics.

Furthermore, measuring effectiveness of a government’s policies in countering radicalisation or terrorism is also hampered by the fact that the state is not the only external (f)actor that has an influence on the behaviour of terrorists. First of all, in a globalised world where transnational terrorism reigns and transnational sources of frustration and grief may be at work, the international landscape plays a key role (de Wijk and Toxopeus 2005). Both national and international discourse, which manifests itself not only through government utterances but through the media, public opinion and debate as well, has a measurable effect upon terrorist behaviour (Crelinsten 1998). Another factor related to context, is the degree of resilience among a population. A citizenry that is easily thrown off balance puts higher and different demands on counterterrorism policies than a resilient population that continues business as usual immediately after an attack (Vasu 2008).

Timing is essential

Finally, timing is an essential element in the introduction or execution of counterterrorism policies which is often overlooked. Counterterrorism measures do not always have the same effect, independent of time. Just like external military intervention in a conflict will have the largest effect at the early stages of a conflict or once the belligerents have become war-weary, the same holds true for countering terrorists (Caulkins et al. 2008). Since terrorism is constantly changing and shifting (Schmid 2005, p. 223) and attacks do not occur along a linear line with set intervals, it is hard to tell whether the terrorist threat is on the increase or on a downward trend. Some would, for instance, argue that US counterterrorism policies after 9/11 have been a success, as at the time of writing no major terrorist operation has succeeded on US soil since. But imagine that tomorrow another attack of a similar or even larger magnitude of 9/11 would occur, would we then still label these same policies a success? Furthermore, the moment of measuring effectiveness is also important because in the short term repressive measures seem to work relatively better, whereas in the long run policies that show more consideration for radical and violent opponents and their complaints seem to be more successful. Time is also essential because terrorist organisations are flexible, adaptable organisations that often learn better and faster than the more rigidly structured hierarchical government organisations that fight them. Terrorist organisations learn from each others’ previous mistakes; hence, that which worked in the field of counterterrorism yesterday may no longer be effective today.

Not effectiveness, but ‘performativity’ of counterterrorism counts

In sum, it is almost impossible to measure arithmetically the outcome of counterterrorism efforts. However, this does not mean that we cannot and should not try to assess the effect
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of governmental policies. The issues outlined above suggest that it is not necessarily the policy measures and their intended results as such, but much more the way in which they are presented and perceived that determine the overall effect of the policy in question.

The key question is therefore really: What do counterterrorism policy-makers want? They set the agenda with respect to the phenomenon of terrorism, define it in a certain way and link it to corresponding measures. Subsequently, they execute these measures, behind closed doors, and with the tacit permission of the public – or, conversely, they feel forced to ‘market’ their measures first, in order to generate a substantial level of public and political support.

The way in which they perform, or in other words carry out the process of countering terrorism, can have more impact than the actual arrests being made (or not being made). This is what we call the performativity of counterterrorism, or its ‘performative power’. The authors would like to introduce the concept ‘performativity’ in this discussion, expressing the extent to which a national government, by means of its official counterterrorism policy and corresponding discourse (in statements, enactments, measures and ministerial remarks), is successful in ‘selling’ its representation of events, its set of solutions to the terrorist problem, as well as being able to set the tone for the overall discourse regarding terrorism and counterterrorism – thereby mobilising (different) audiences for its purposes.

There is of course a difference between threat assessment and threat perception, and there are other players in the field apart from official state actors. Here, however, our focus is on the government’s attempts to persuade public opinion of the legitimacy and accuracy of its threat assessment. In terms of developing counterterrorism policies, this is particularly relevant because counterterrorism officials – and we as academics and advisers – can exert influence particularly on this field (see also the introduction and conclusion in Forest 2009).

Counterterrorism measures (in statements, enactments, activities, expressions made by cabinet members) set the tone for the political and public debate. Government statements and memoranda are not mere texts: they create reality. This is certainly the case when the presentation and definition of new policy dovetails with existing threat perceptions in the population (on communism, immigration or new religions, for instance); when they tune in to historical experiences (such as previous conflicts, attacks or major disasters); if they depict the alleged terrorist threat as foreign, radically ‘different’ and alien or fundamentally hostile; or if they succeed in promoting terrorism as a central issue in a political game or campaign (by portraying the opposition as being ‘soft on terrorism’ or by presenting themselves as the nation’s saviour from all evil). When these implicitly or explicitly formulated representations of ‘threats’, ‘enemies’ and ‘security’ are accepted by the majority of the population, political and social conflicts could be heightened. Consensus subsequently gives way to polarisation, acceptance of the limitation of civil liberties and stigmatisation of radical ideas. Counterterrorism measures therefore clarify which radical ideas are still tolerated, what level of sympathy with revolutionary terrorists is still permitted and which infringements on civil liberties are accepted for the sake of national security.

To leave no doubt: a high measure of ‘performative power’ is not equivalent to effective, decisive or successful policy (if such qualities are at all measurable). It rather relates to the visibility and the mobilising power of the applied strategies. In the Netherlands up until the 1990s, for example, the security agencies always kept their activities behind closed doors, made no public announcements about these activities and did not try to involve the population in their efforts. In that case, the level of performative power remained low, although the security service achieved many successes in undermining and debilitating domestic extremism and terrorism.
Evaluating the performative power of counterterrorism

We would like to emphasise the importance of paying attention to the process and the performance of counterterrorism, because research points to a distinct relation between the performative power of counterterrorism instruments and the arc of violence carried out by terrorist movements. De Graaf (2010a) identified 14 factors that enhance the performative power of counterterrorism activities and plotted them against the number of terrorist attacks and casualties in four countries: the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the United States. Her research was limited to the 1970s due to the availability of data both on terrorist attacks and the measures undertaken to counter them.

The performative power of counterterrorism is in the first place defined by answering the question of whether terrorism was identified by the afflicted governments as a political problem, and was correspondingly put on the political agenda. If so, we should ask whether the issue was given the highest priority and whether it became the heart of political struggles in a country; in other words, whether the question was politicised. The presence of other crises could, however, diminish the urgency of the problem again. In the second place, it is relevant whether terrorism was defined as directly threatening public safety and security, in other words, whether the ‘subjective insecurity’ connected to this threat was high. If terrorism is considered a containable, low-impact problem, the performative power of counterterrorism policies usually remains lower. A third aspect that determines the performative power is the issue of defining the circle of terrorist perpetrators. How broad or narrow do governments define the threat of terrorism? To what extent do they include not only obvious offenders, but also sympathisers, supporters or even apologists of terrorism in their target group? Related to this issue is the extent to which the terrorist threat is discursively linked to existing threats, fears and rifts in society, such as the fear for civil strife, for chaos, for communists, for immigration and so forth. A fourth set of questions establishes the extent to which the counterterrorist measures have a mobilising impact on society. A fifth element points to the manner in which the ‘battle’ against terrorism is conducted: is it presented as relentless against the broad circle of terrorists and their sympathisers, or is there some attempt to address the grievances or the objectives of the protests by the broader movement from which the terrorists in certain cases stem?

Taken together, we have distinguished 14 aspects – related to activities undertaken by the counterterrorism authorities – that affect the performative power of counterterrorism policies.

Aspects pertaining to the ‘politicisation of counterterrorism’

More attention for counterterrorism is generated when the political leaders personally and explicitly express themselves on the issue, rather than leaving this to lower level authorities. When counterterrorism has a high priority, and is demonstrated as such by the highest possible political authority (e.g. in a presidential speech), the performative power is correspondingly higher.

When counterterrorism becomes the central issue in electoral campaigns or is employed to demonise the political opponent, the issue is politicised, and the performativity usually increases.

When the perceived personal risk is high and counterterrorism officials feel directly threatened themselves (for instance because colleagues have previously been targeted by terrorist actions), the performative power increases as well, since the sense of urgency and threat is higher.

The resonance of terrorist violence and the extent to which the public is prepared to accept counterterrorism measures is also amplified when the issue has national priority.
over other issues (such as financial crises, environmental hazards etc.). On the contrary, if new crises from a completely different policy field emerge, attention from terrorism might drift away, and the performativity decreases.

**Aspects pertaining to the discursive framing of the terrorist threat**

When the threat is expanded to include not only the specific terrorist offenders, but also sympathisers and the broader terrorist constituency, the threat demarcation becomes broader and more urgent, which also fuels the performativity.

When war rhetoric is used or the tone of the discourse grows more militant, the performative power increases.

When counterterrorism officials or responsible politicians refer to historical experiences of (civil) war, chaos and violence, existing or slumbering fears are invoked and the persuasiveness of counterterrorism policy and the severity of the threat are enhanced.

The explicit refusal to ‘talk to’ terrorists – not wanting to enter into negotiations with them, for instance, or not offering them exit-strategies or re-integration programmes – also keeps the performative power high.

When no shared tradition, culture or overlap of values exists between the terrorists and those countering their actions, and the counterterrorism policy explicitly capitalises on this mental distance, the discourse will be increasingly irreconcilable and intransigent. In such a case, the performative power is high: society rallies against terrorism, the (alleged) terrorist sympathisers feel antagonised.

**Aspects pertaining to the mobilisation efforts in the struggle against terrorism**

Counterterrorism officials can also explicitly and directly mobilise the population. By placing fugitive terrorists on a ‘Ten Most Wanted’ list and initiating raids or witch-hunts, the population becomes directly involved in counterterrorism. This increases the visibility of the policy, demonstrates the government’s decisiveness, but also increases the performance of counterterrorism policy.

Deploying special units – that are generally trained for a higher spectrum of violence than regular police units – to investigate, prosecute or arrest terrorists adds more drama to the situation, which leads to an increase in the performative power.

The introduction of new anti-terrorism legislation also increases the performative power, since it establishes new legal categories, new offences and new types of perpetrators in the counterterrorism discourse.

The introduction of new legislation that is not specifically aimed at terrorism also gives counterterrorism policy a supplementary boost, since new laws affect the tone of the discussion, attract media attention and affect the terrorist’s constituencies.

Major ‘terrorism trials’ – trials that involve national or regional prosecution officers (or Grand Juries) trying well-known individuals or entire groups – often serve to generate a dynamic and mobilising power (such as solidarity campaigns, hunger strikes, protest demonstrations, acts of revenge, etc.). Hence, the performativity of counterterrorism increases as well.

**Some tentative findings**

In her study *Theater van de angst* (Theatre of fear), de Graaf (2010a) applied this method to the situation in the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the United States in the 1970s,
utilising source-based research on their counterterrorism policies. The source material included government archives, media sources and interviews. Her research indicated that a positive connection existed between the way in which counterterrorism in those countries was ‘performed’ and succeeded in mobilising the population on the one hand, and the course and level of the terrorist violence on the other.

The first relation was rather clear cut: when the number of incidents and victims was high, the ensuing counterterrorism measures unfolded a large performative power, and had a great mobilising impact. This is not a surprise: terrorist actions create havoc, are usually reported in the media, and trigger social fear and political responses. Interestingly, there was however a second relationship that points in the reverse direction. On the basis of this study, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis that the performative power of counterterrorism policy sometimes also influences the course of violence. In other words, when counterterrorism strategies had a high performative power and when they demonstrated a substantial potential to persuade and mobilise the public, as was the case in the United States, Italy and West Germany in the 1970s, the terrorist violence subsequently also increased. Conversely, after a certain amount of time, a decline in this ‘performative power’ preceded, either visibly or less visibly, a decrease in the number of terrorist incidents.

This second link can be interpreted in different ways. Of course, the decrease in terrorist attacks could be a direct result of counterterrorism efforts. Measures often have a delayed effect: it takes some time before new competences (better investigative methods, intelligence operations, etc.) really start to undermine a terrorist movement’s capacities. However, it still is remarkable that a high level of mobilising efforts went hand in hand with a continuing radicalisation of potential new terrorist recruits and with a succession of new terrorist incidents. We could therefore tentatively introduce a second explanation for this link, namely, that the end of a cycle of terrorist violence can partly be ascribed to a decrease of political and public relevance attached to terrorism and counterterrorism (and not solely the other way around). It appears that, in certain cases, terrorists abandon their violent course of action when they notice that terrorism fails to move public and political sentiments or when they have become unable to regroup due to a lack of recruits, sympathisers or supporters.

Contrary to what many people assume in their first response to terrorist actions, it became evident whilst studying the cycle of terrorism and the responses to it in the 1970s and the 1980s in the countries mentioned above, that a visible increase of power, responsible authorities or measures did not automatically lead to a more effective form of counterterrorism. In the middle and long run, opting for ‘punctual’ crime prevention, reserved language and a certain level of secrecy constituted the most valuable contribution to the restoration of societal peace. This was the case in the 1970s and for a large part it still is today, even though the speed of communication has increased, the activities of intelligence and security services are much more spotlighted and withholding information has become considerably less expedient.

It is furthermore remarkable that a lack of measures, manpower and instruments – undoubtedly bewailed by policy-makers – and a weak implementation power did not always work out unfavourably. The low level of performative power of counterterrorism policy in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s took the sharpest edge away from a number of radicalisation tendencies. The interaction between counterterrorism strategies and terrorist activity did depend on a number of factors over which counterterrorism officials had little control: the initial preparedness of terrorists to commit violence, the existing fears and dominant public discourses as well as the political debates on threats to national security. Nevertheless, even in a state of polarisation, governmental action could
have a moderating effect, as became apparent when examining the approach of choice of both German Interior Minister Baum and the Italian government in 1978. The monopoly of violence and access to national media and population are still among the government’s most crucial prerogatives, particularly in the struggle against terrorism. In short, there are better alternatives for politicians than maintaining policies or continuing to enact new ones that aim to demonstrate state power or to mobilise the society at large.

Of course, the decades of the 1970s and 1980s differ from today’s era of ‘the global War on Terror’. Compared with the relatively nationally oriented terrorist groups that attacked societies in that previous period, and the correspondingly nationally developed and implemented policy strategies to respond to that violence, it is much more difficult for governments to control their performance in the global struggle against jihadi terrorism nowadays. They face a terrorist threat that – in its narrative and its ideology at least – is more global than it ever was. This makes it much more difficult for governments to stick to their own national approach. The performance of any government in ‘the West’ has become inextricably linked to the international struggle against terrorism since 2001. Foreign ‘injustice frames’ that inspire new waves of radicalisation at home are being imported from abroad by local radical movements. The Israeli bombing in Gaza, for example, can serve extremist movements in Amsterdam or Antwerp anytime – thus replacing national-level, more immediate causes or injustice frames by international and much more unpredictable and incalculable ones. In addition, governments have to deal with independent global media and autonomous citizens that are continuously producing their own narratives through the internet or other real time communication instruments, such as Twitter.

Today, the performativity of counterterrorism strategies seems much higher, given the speed of communication means, the dramatising influence of new media and the global discourse on the ‘war on terrorism’ – even although the Obama administration has discarded this metaphor, it still lives on in the discussions. In the struggle against jihadi terrorism, the mental distance between radical Islamists or jihadists on the one hand and the open, democratic societies of ‘the West’ on the other is often viewed as much larger than the conflict between anti-imperialist, left wing or ethnonationalist groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Global discourse on terrorism has become much more inflammatory and more militant since ‘9/11’ than in previous decades. The public threat discourse pertaining to jihadi terrorism, moreover, has not restricted itself to radical factions, but has been generalised to include the Muslim community as a whole. In this context, several more potential and actual signifiers have affected counterterrorism, fuelling the legends of injustice, oppression and discrimination that feed support for a radical ideology. Consequently, deradicalisation policies are often forced to compete against a public moral panic that is difficult to confront.

However, the same mechanisms that applied to the struggle against terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s could also provide solutions today. Whether we deal with terrorist organisations with a leftwing, extremist, ethnonationalist or Islamist background, in all cases it is of paramount importance that both government and its constitutive organs refrain from fanning public discourse on terrorism. In relation to the radical movement that should be countered, it is crucial to identify existing signifiers and corresponding legends in time, and to anticipate potential new ones continually. In close cooperation with organisations that represent the terrorists’ constituencies, the governments should facilitate strategies that aim at combating those legends by means of ‘neutralisers’ or ‘counternarratives’ and, in doing so, isolate the ‘entrepreneurs of violence’ (Demant and de Graaf 2010, see also Kessels 2010).
This is as relevant today as it was in the 1970s. Only recently, the now former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband identified such a ‘signifier’ that fuelled the performative power of counterterrorism strategies in a negative way: with their ‘call to arms’ in the years following ‘9/11’, the US and UK governments had mobilised the public against a joint enemy and had proclaimed a state of emergency that warranted extreme measures. This armed persuasiveness and effective national mobilisation had nevertheless not manifested itself as a blessing, but rather as a curse to Western society:

The call for a ‘war on terror’ was a call to arms, an attempt to build solidarity for a fight against a single shared enemy. But the foundation for solidarity between peoples and nations should be based not on who we are against, but on the idea of who we are and the values we share. Terrorists succeed when they render countries fearful and vindictive; when they sow division and animosity; when they force countries to respond with violence and repression. The best response is to refuse to be cowed. (cited in The Guardian 2009; see also NRC Handelsblad 2009a)

Generating fear and anxiety through publicity is one of the terrorist’s prime motives; this element can be found in 21.5% of those 109 definitions of terrorism listed by Alex P. Schmid and Albert Jongman (Schmid and Jongman 1988, pp. 5–6, also Dershowitz 2002, Richardson 2006). As terrorism expert Brian Jenkins argued, as early as 1975, ‘[t]errorism is theatre’ (Jenkins 1975, p. 16). Most terrorists desire this theatre; they are bent on causing visible drama and provoking state power. Without wanting to essentialise terrorism (since it manifests itself in a variety of ways, dependent on time, place, cause and context), this is as valid for ethnonationalist and anticolonialists as it is for jihadi terrorists. The dimension of the intended drama, media coverage and policy provocation can of course be totally different, but the impact of their actions depends on our reaction (Waldmann 2005, Richardson 2006). This reaction is partly produced by public opinion, the media and the gripping images of dramatic terrorist attacks that are disseminated via them. The government can however also purposely affect this impact (Furedi 2007). This can be effectuated both in a reinforcing sense, by amplifying the ‘moral panic’ in society with military metaphors (‘we are at war’) and in a moderating sense, by emphasising and appealing to the social resilience of a society. Immediately after the London bombings of 7 July 2005, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair did exactly this: ‘Terror will not win, we will not be intimidated’ (BBC News 2005). However, aside from managing the terrorist impact, a government can also influence the terrorists, their sympathisers and constituency directly through the performance of its policies and activities.

Today’s terrorists seem to understand this notion better than do governments themselves. Before US President Barack Obama’s visit to Egypt, Osama bin Laden, via Al Jazeera, warned the Arabic world that the United States was still demonising Muslims. With this message, al-Qaeda’s leader tried to neutralise the – from his perspective – threatening effects of the historical dialogue and cooperation that Obama offered the ‘Muslim World’ (New York Daily News 2009). After all, with his offer, the American President undermined the efforts the jihadists were undertaking to mobilise their supporters. Bin Laden realises very well that the jihadists require stories of injustice and repression to convince themselves and others of the legitimacy of their struggle and to keep their supporters motivated and loyal.

Conclusion
Essentially, terrorists and Western democracies are conducting ‘influence warfare’, a battle to convince and persuade the different ‘target audiences’ to rally behind them (see the
introduction and conclusion in Forest 2009). In this battle of perceptions, the different
government agencies – in the areas of police, justice, intelligence and social services –
therefore have to be aware of the often implicit and unwittingly produced ‘stories’ they
tell to counter those narrated by the terrorists. It is essential to take in consideration the
fact that combating terrorism is a form of communication, as is terrorism itself (Casebeer
and Russell 2005). Terrorists receive and interpret these messages, try to distort them, and
subsequently use them to fuel sentiments of oppression and injustice. Before governments
issue their own counternarrative to oppose these myths – which is demanded frequently
(see the suggestion in Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law. Theoretical
Treatise on Counterterrorism Approaches 2007, pp. 18, 24–25) – they are forced to render
an explanation of their unintentional and implicit messages (also de Graaf 2009, 2010b).

In the discussion on the effectiveness of counterterrorism, we have attempted to problematise a mere technical and short-term assessment of counterterrorism measures and
have instead drawn attention to an often neglected field: the relationship between perform-
ance of counterterrorism efforts and terrorist activity. In our research, it has become
apparent that high-visibility and mobilising powers are not by definition positive concepts
in relation to counterterrorism. In general, a low level of performative power has a more
rapidly neutralising effect on radicalisation and political violence than large-scale, public
counterterrorism efforts. Unless governments pay careful attention to the effects of their
policies, the struggle against terrorism can be likened to shooting at a mosquito with a
canon, thereby creating considerable collateral damage, while the real target may still be
pestering us. Given these caveats and uncertainties, we have pointed out that it is not so much
the effects and outcome of counterterrorism policies upon which we should focus, but the
practices or the performance by the government in the process of countering terrorism.

This requires a change of mind that should not only come from politicians and officials. It also requires that the public at large will change its attitude vis-à-vis the risk and
threat of terrorism. This demands a completely different government policy than we have
seen in some of the Western countries following 9/11. It implies that governments refrain
from measures that only increase anxiety among their citizens and lessen their resilience.
Governments should empower themselves by putting more faith in their citizens again.
After all, a public that shrugs its shoulders over terrorist deeds is the best method to show
terrorists that at least their means are not effective (Mueller 2005a, p. 497). Only when
democratic governments succeed in neutralising public fears and shatter the myths and
half-truth of repression the terrorists are spreading will they manage to take the wind out
of the sails that keep them floating (Sageman 2004, p. 176, Gunaratna 2007).

Notes
1. This is the adaptation of the concept of ‘performance’ or ‘performative power’ as introduced
and described in J. Butler and J. L. Austin’s discourse analysis and theory (Austin 1962,
2. This concept and definition are worked out by de Graaf (2010a).
3. Lene Hansen applied the method of discourse analysis and ‘framing’ of ‘the other’ to foreign
security politics as a threat to the domestic community. Partly continuing Hansen’s (2006)
example, this study effectuates a conversion to domestic security policy.
4. This section is based on de Graaf (2010a).

References
Review, 52 (1), 1–27.


