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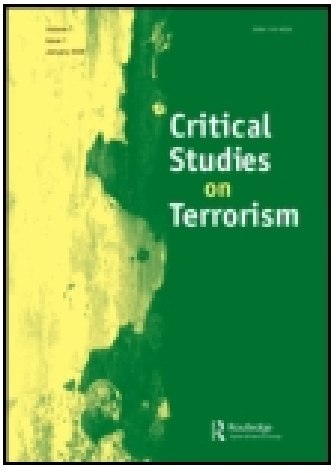

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Editors' introduction: critical terrorism studies: practice, limits and experience

Charlotte Heath-Kelly[a], Lee Jarvis[b] & Christopher Baker-Beall[c]
[a] Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
[b] School of Political, Social and International Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK
[c] Division of Politics and International Relations, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK
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EDITORIAL

Editors' introduction: critical terrorism studies: practice, limits and experience

Charlotte Heath-Kelly[a,*], Lee Jarvis[b] and Christopher Baker-Beall[c]

[a]*Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK;* [b]*School of Political, Social and International Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK;* [c]*Division of Politics and International Relations, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK*

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The articles in this special issue are drawn from papers presented at a conference titled *Critical Terrorism Studies: Practice, Limits and Experience*. The conference was organised by the Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group of the British International Studies Association (BISA). The event was supported by both a BISA workshop grant and by Loughborough University's Centre for the Study of International Governance (CSIG) and was held at Loughborough University from 9–10 September 2013. The conference aimed to explore what we know about terrorism and counterterrorism and importantly to ask how we know it. Reflecting the recent "materialist", "everyday", "experiential" and "narrative" turns in the fields of International Relations (IR), Geography and Cultural Theory, the event brought together scholars and practitioners to reflect on practices of research and knowledge production in Critical Terrorism Studies and related fields. The articles in this special issue reflect those aims.

Keywords: critical terrorism studies; experience; narrative turn; limits; terror wars

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Introduction

What can we know about terrorism and counterterrorism, and how can we know it? Reflecting the recent "materialist", "everyday", "experiential" and "narrative" turns in disciplines including IR, Geography and Cultural Theory, this special issue brings together articles which explore practices of research and knowledge production in Critical Terrorism Studies and related fields. The increasingly technological deployment of counterterrorism through machines which scan, calculate, measure and even destroy poses questions for critical scholars working on political violence, many of whom have been drawn towards discursive approaches in their analyses (see, for example, Baker-Beall 2013; Croft 2006; Holland 2013; Jackson 2005; Jarvis 2009). Concurrently, while technological practices of counterterrorism are important, how should we also account for the affective character and experiences of counterterrorism, as well as the experience of conflict more broadly?

These dynamics of technology and affect are situated, we argue, within the contextual grey area of the supposedly "post-war on terror". Has it ended? Security policies continue to propagate fears of terror, but in an era where the most evident excesses and exceptionalisms of the war on terror have been wound down. Thus, while UK Prime Minister David Cameron might now feel sufficiently emboldened to declare Afghanistan "Mission

*Corresponding author. Email: c.heath-kelly@warwick.ac.uk

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Accomplished" (BBC News 2013), the problem of normalised and often unremarked regimes of violence must be confronted. Domains of law and politics have made tacit acknowledgement of the problems of rendition, detention and house arrest, and yet detainees remain caged without recourse to legal process. Regimes of surveillance legitimise "targeted" practices against bodies deemed risky, and the international spread of radicalisation policies continues to frame race and religiosity on a spectrum of "vulnerability" toward becoming terrorist (Heath-Kelly 2013). Of what significance is this normalisation? And, how can we contest, resist or even disrupt a legal/political machine which makes tacit acknowledgement of the problems of exceptional governance but takes no practical measures to end the practices performed in its name?

In this Special Issue of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, we have collected a series of articles which reflect upon these dynamics and their importance in the "post–war on terror" era. In this introduction, we attempt to tease out the importance of experience, practice and limits to the deployment of counterterrorism in both contemporary and historical eras. Many of the articles which follow explicitly explore the significance of the "felt" impact of counterterrorism on populations, activist communities or the bodies of detainees (see also, Jarvis and Lister 2013a; Lister and Jarvis 2013). This experiential emphasis reflects wider "narrative" and "corporeal" turns in IR and (Critical) Security Studies (see, for example, Salter and Mutlu 2013; Shepherd 2013). As a critical method, the narrative exploration of counterterrorism through fictional and non-fictional experience (Sylvester, this issue) serves to draw hitherto obscured dimensions of this subject field into the light. Christine Sylvester's keynote address at the recent Annual Critical Terrorism Studies conference of 2013 (reproduced in this issue) juxtaposes experiences of the Boston Lockdown after the marathon bombing with fictionalised accounts of the Iraq War to question the supposed boundary between terrorism and war, critical terrorism studies and critical war studies. From a different direction, Florian Edelmann (this issue) also engages with the production of narrative and meaning through his analysis of the linguistic fields of struggle which characterise the terrorist/counterterrorist dynamic.

Language, meaning and experience are bound together in the practice and study of political violence. The discursive fields which structure our understandings of war and terrorism also serve to legitimise and delegitimise violent struggles. The contributors to this special issue pay special attention to these processes, often focusing explicitly upon the supposedly exceptional practices of counterterrorism now deployed in the "normal" sphere of governing dissent. What can the purportedly post–war on terror reveal about the transference of exceptional measures to heartlands of power after their deployment overseas (Sylvester, this issue), and how are these methods utilised to quell and discipline dissent (Loadenthal, this issue)? Furthermore, given this shift in the discursive situation of exceptional measures, should we even consider the excesses of counterterrorism within the remit of the exception? This supposed exceptionality of counterterrorist measures (Boukalas, this issue) has much to tell us, in the post-war on terror era, about the technologies and felt-experiences of contemporary security and the limits which structure our academic engagements.

This pulling at the boundaries which separate terrorism from war, exception from norm, war on terror from post–war on terror, has implications, too, for our political landscapes. Several of the articles contained in this issue engage directly with the challenge of identifying "the" state within these developments. Two (Boukalas; Jarvis and Lister) set out explicitly to challenge conceptualisations of this convenient political fiction that dominate conventional and critical literature on (counter)terrorism and beyond. Others (Loadenthal; Martin; O'Branski) force our attention upon this fiction's constituent

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parts and the importance of localised identities, interests, practices and violences within the broader ecology of (counter)terrorism of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As these articles show, these discussions have major implications, too, for the practice of (critical) terrorism research: opening up new questions, methodologies and theoretical possibilities for those seeking a model of terrorism scholarship that exceeds the ameliorative promises of problem-solving techniques.

Critical terrorism studies, narrative and experience

Stories of personal experience have often been ignored in the academic pursuit of "real knowledge". The fields of inquiry within International Relations and Strategic Studies, in particular, have been constituted through a dominant rationalist paradigm which excludes experiential knowledge and the narrative form as unworthy topics and forms of study (Jarvis and Lister 2013b). Instead, these disciplines have colonised the "international" as their domain, interpreting this as an abstract field composed of state-units and international organisations, rather than constituted through multiple lives and domains of experience. However, following "narrative turns" in disciplines such as International Relations (Moore and Farrands 2010), History and Literary Studies (Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire 2008, 1–26), the social sciences are beginning to open to alternative methods and their potential for disrupting abstracted and overly formalised studies with voices of experience.

If we reflect upon the question of what we can know about terrorism and counterterrorism, and how we might know it, then the feminist commitment to revealing the politicality of everyday life provides a compelling methodological avenue for such exploration. To know about terrorism and counterterrorism, it is important to find the voices of those who have experienced them and bring those stories to the foreground of our analyses. The history of the narrative method is conjoined with the feminist commitment to unsilencing domains of experience which are hidden in the background of politics and research. Despite its articulation through both (radically opposed) humanist and poststructuralist traditions, which fundamentally disagree on the existence of a cohesive and whole subject in the liberal form, the narrative method is gaining popularity for its functionality in providing resistance against totalising discourses and political projects (Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire 2008, 4). In the feminist tradition, this has involved the collection of autobiographical writings by women on their lives, and in historical studies, the method of oral history can be associated with narrative method. To put it simply, stories about experiences matter; they can achieve a salience and critical potential that offers something different – and perhaps something more – than the dry theorising or data collection on which academia thrives (see Sylvester 2011).

This special issue begins with two articles which emphasise the experiential within variegated counterterrorism techniques. Professor Christine Sylvester juxtaposes a fictional account of an Iraq war battle (written by a veteran of that conflict) with the experiences of those made subject to lockdown after the Boston bombings of April 2013. Contrastingly, Michael Loadenthal does not use an explicit narrative method but focuses his analysis on the infiltration of activist movements by police officers and the relationships of deceptive intimacy which can develop thereafter. His analysis of activists' experiences of inadvertently "sleeping with the enemy" highlights the deliberate strategy, on the part of the state, to create a constant experience of suspicion and distrust within activist movements, thereby limiting their organisational potential and creating docile subjects.

Both of these articles focus heavily on the experience of those populations made subject to counter-insurgency and counterterrorism techniques in order to reveal

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previously hidden dimensions of the terrorist/counterterrorism dialectic. They also both focus on the normalisation and domestication of counterterrorism practices that might readily be described as "exceptional". The tourists of Boston, the air and train travellers of the eastern seaboard on the day of the Boston bombing, and the protestors who developed relationships with undercover officers were all made subject to counterterrorism – while going about their normal lives in familiar surroundings. We are told that the war on terror has supposedly ended, yet these articles reveal its normalisation in the policing of dissent and in responses to emergencies. And, let us remember, it was not the bomb which disrupted the entire transport network of the eastern United States and locked down an entire city: rather, it was the pursuit of a lone offender.

Through her juxtaposition of the Boston lockdown with the US Army engagements around Al Tafar in 2004, Christine Sylvester explicitly plays with the breakdown of distinctions between terrorism and war, and between the domestic and international. How should we understand the supposed distinction between terrorism and war when acts of terrorism provoke wars in foreign lands and the counter-insurgency techniques deployed in theatre then return home to the streets of Boston? How should we understand the supposed distinction between the domestic and the international when citizens are made subject to curfew by the US military in both? In a powerful use of narrative method, the article draws from the experiences of those lives disrupted by such practices to argue that terrorism and war are not discrete phenomena, and neither are the academic fields of Critical Terrorism Studies and Critical War Studies.

Whereas Professor Sylvester's article uses an explicit narrative methodology to juxtapose counter-insurgency operations from Boston and Iraq, Michael Loadenthal's article explores the suppression of dissent, and the experience of counterterrorism as an intimate war, by deploying case studies of sexual infiltration by police officers. Utilising Foucault's conception of disciplinary power and his famous re-reading of Bentham's panopticon, Loadenthal explores the strategies of the UK and US states who suppress activists by sowing seeds of distrust in their movements through the constant fear of infiltration by unknown agents. Loadenthal argues in this article that the experience of disgust and suspicion is crucial to the governmental technique of sexual infiltration. If such surveillance were secret, rather than exposed, activists would not fear infiltration and would not modify their behaviours and organisational structures accordingly. And so the deployment of counterterrorism has not only "come home" in the sense of the turn towards resilience-focused domestic technologies (Coaffee and Murakami Wood 2006), it has now entered the bedroom. The counterterrorism of the post-war on terror has reached the micro-level of the most private spheres of life. And, in response, narrative approaches within the study of counterterrorism are imbued with the potential to reclaim the private life as political – making silenced and felt experience centrepieces of resistance to totalising projects of control.

In summary then, both articles note the potential for experience-focused and narrative contributions to the Critical Terrorism Studies project. The experiences of lockdown and sexual infiltration speak to us of counterterrorism regimes "coming home" from Iraq and Afghanistan to surveil, curtail and disrupt our everyday lives in the previously-designated space of "normality". The war on terror has ended, long live the terrorwars (Sylvester, this issue).

Critical terrorism studies: moving beyond the limits

The second section of this issue consists of three articles that seek to question and move us beyond the limits of contemporary understandings of key concepts within the (critical)

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terrorism studies lexicon: "state terrorism", "radicalisation" and "suicide terrorism". In so doing, they speak to the problematique facing critical researchers when the tools of academia achieve limited purchase upon the experiences, technologisation and discursive situation of contemporary counterterrorism. How might researchers within the Critical Terrorism Studies field subvert these limits?

In this issue, Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister challenge much of the research conducted to date on the concept of state terrorism for its often unreflective and limited conceptualisation of the state. Too often, they argue, is the state treated in this literature as an instrumental unitary rational actor with a singularity of interest and purpose. They contend that, aside from a few notable exceptions (Blakeley 2007, 2009), much work in this area mobilises an unnecessarily pared down approach to the state that is limited to executive decision-makers and their military apparatuses. They argue insightfully that this is problematic for two reasons. The first problem they identify is that the boundaries of the modern state are far more opaque than implied in much of the research on state terrorism. The second is the linear relationship that is thought to exist between the interests of the state and its acts of terrorist violence. The second problem is particularly prescient in that it results in the treatment of the state as an ontologically stable and bounded unit of analysis, with pre-defined interests, that either directly commissions or engages in terrorist acts for instrumental reasons.

Instead, they maintain that we need to go beyond the restrictive limits that this conceptualisation of the state places on debates involving state terrorism. The main thrust of Jarvis and Lister's argument is that in relation to state terrorism, what we interpret as intentional acts of political violence (or terrorism) on the part of an instrumental agent (the state) are better understood as the effects of power relationships derived from the complex and elaborate networks of institutions, organisations, agencies and individuals. In making this argument, they point to the utility of a "governmentality" approach for furthering our understandings of the phenomena – not phenomenon – of state terrorism.

Similarly, Thomas Martin advocates the adoption of a governmentality perspective for the purpose of furthering our understanding of the United Kingdom's approach to counter-radicalisation: the "Prevent" strategy. Martin's perceptive analysis of radicalisation and efforts to counter it challenges conventional understandings of this phenomenon, which limit the idea of radicalisation to a process based around conceptualisations of vulnerability (Home Office 2009, 2011). In this sense, Martin provides a further contribution to a growing literature that is critical of the concept of radicalisation – a literature which views radicalisation as a powerful political discourse that functions to construct particular communities as potential threat, thereby legitimating governmental interventions in those communities designated as a potential source of threat (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010; Heath-Kelly 2013; Heath-Kelly, Jarvis, and Baker-Beall, forthcoming; Kundnani 2009). In particular, Martin moves beyond the limits of conventional understandings of radicalisation by demonstrating how the UK's counter-radicalisation response is based upon the construction of racialised vulnerability within particular segments of the British population. He combines this with an analysis that draws out how the exercise of counter-radicalisation is deployed through the appropriation of technologies of risk management and governmental practices based around precautionary and pre-emptive security.

Likewise, Claire Lyness draws on the Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and biopolitics to explore the literature on "suicide terrorism", with the aim of establishing a more nuanced understanding of the figure of the "suicide bomber". Lyness challenges what she argues has come to form the conventional view of "suicide terrorism" (as a type of rational action designed to maximise utility in relation to the aims of the terrorist). She

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does this not to argue that suicide terrorism is irrational, but rather to demonstrate that the literature on suicide terrorism can be read as a form of governmental practice that constructs the act of "suicide bombing" as rational action, in order that the phenomenon may be effectively governed and managed. She goes on to postulate that despite the attempts made to mediate the risk posed by the suicide bomber through his conceptualisation as a rational actor, suicide terrorism continues to exceed the confines of governmental control in important ways.

In particular, she draws our attention to the case of the female suicide bomber and the contested narrative over the type of risk the female suicide bomber poses. Lyness explains that female suicide bombers are often represented as more lethal precisely because of their feminine embodiment but that they are also simultaneously constructed as vulnerable as a result of that same femininity, the literature thereby functioning to deny those women agency for their actions. She concludes by highlighting what she views as the central problem with counterterrorist governmentality in relation to the suicide bomber. The suicide bomber is for Lyness a risky subject so he must be governed, but also, he (or she) is risky so they cannot be governed, ensuring that the threat from suicide terrorism persists despite all attempts to domesticate and to govern it.

In summary then, all three articles provide valuable contributions to debates within the (critical) terrorism studies literature in relation to the concepts of "state terrorism", "radicalisation" and "suicide terrorism". Each article embraces the notion of governmentality and provides us with a framework for challenging the conventional wisdom on each of these concepts, subverting the artificial restrictions or limits placed on our understandings of "state terrorism", "radicalisation" and "suicide terrorism".

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Critical terrorism studies: practices of resistance

The final three articles of this issue draw upon, extend and set out to challenge prominent theoretical frameworks within contemporary (critical) explorations of terrorism and counterterrorism through an engagement with various practices of resistance. Megan O'Branski's article provides an investigation of the 1981 hunger strike protest at HMP Maze which draws upon theories of performativity and the abject to read this resistance as an effort to weaponise – and thereby remasculinise – the strikers' bodies. This is situated as a response to the violence and the feminising, humiliating gaze of the British state and its petty sovereigns working as guards at the prison. Exploring the sexualisation of incarceration during the Troubles, O'Branski reads the purposeful self-starvation of detained bodies as a practice of resistance to a totalising counterterrorism which attempted to dominate every aspect of prisoner's lives. With notable parallels and contrasts to contemporary critical literatures on the weaponisation of the martyred body (Dillon 2009; Mbembe and Meintjes 2003), O'Branski identifies a resistance which targets the already-victimised body to reclaim its dignity and thus resist the sovereign claim upon the flesh.

The other articles in this section share O'Branski's focus on practices of resistance, but explore the context of academic theorising and potential avenues for resisting dominant (critical and/or traditional) models for understanding. Christos Boukalas' article develops a critique of widespread readings of the war on terrorism – and especially developments within homeland security therein – as indicative of a movement toward a permanent "state of exception". For Boukalas, Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 2005) hugely influential work on this theme is found wanting in several ways, not least in its stripping of concrete politico-legal developments from the contexts of their socio-historical emergence. In resistance to

the force of the academic state of exception, he situates the USA PATRIOT Act and Guantanamo Bay within a Strategic Relational Approach from which these developments can be read as an effort to manage crisis. Echoing the contributions of Martin and Jarvis and Lister (both this issue), Boukalas argues that this poses potential for a more nuanced approach to the state's efforts at homeland security than that found in writings on exceptionalism. Extending his critique to the deployment of these techniques, he argues that these sites represent phase III in the movement of the US toward authoritarian statism.

The final article (Edelmann, this issue) pulls our attention back from efforts to counterterrorism to dominant explanations of terrorist violence. As Edelmann correctly points out, it is increasingly common for academic engagements to make sense of terrorism as a form of, or effort at, communication: sometimes framed as publicity-seeking (see Jackson et al. 2011, 116–117). While such understandings might shed light upon the symbolic, performative and social functions of violence, the notion of communication itself, he argues, is rarely given the attention it deserves in these accounts. For Edelmann, "communication" is too frequently understood in a narrowly instrumental way: as the act of transmitting a message from sender to receiver. To resist this discursive conceptualisation, he argues that a Luhmannian approach can provide novel and meaningful insights into the fields which structure communication. Luhmann conceives of communication as a medium of social differentiation that serves to constitute the violence's "author" and their distinction from its various "readers". Edelmann illustrates his argument with examples taken from the writings and practices of three "left-libertarian" groups: the Red Army Faction (RAF), Revolutionary Cells (RZ) and the Belgian Fighting Communist Cells (CCC).

Following on from the examination of limits in academic research on counter(terrorism), all three articles contained within this section highlight practices of resistance – embodied or conceptual – to dominant framings of violence and security. Through starving the body, rejecting discourses of exceptionalism, or focusing on the constitutive and performative dimensions of violence, researchers in Critical Terrorism Studies might further overcome the limits which structure engagement with the felt, narrativised and technologised dimensions of contemporary terror wars (Sylvester, this issue).

Conclusion

This editors' introduction is obviously not the appropriate place for diagnosing the current state of "critical" research on terrorism and counterterrorism; much less for prognosing the health of its futures. That said, the articles collected here, for us, stand as evidence of the diversity of work currently conducted under this (broad, contested, shifting) appellation and the importance of the contributions being made therein. Three such contributions, in particular, stand out to us, to which we now turn in concluding this introduction.

First, the articles collected here demonstrate the sophistication of conceptual debate currently being conducted within (critical) terrorism research. Whether or not criticisms of this field's theoretical tendencies were, in the past, warranted (Hayward 2011; Heath-Kelly 2010; Herring and Stokes 2011), work such as this renders such challenges increasingly precarious. The articles in this volume not only make new use of highly visible authors including Michel Foucault (Loadenthal; Lyness; Martin), Judith Butler (O'Branski) and Giorgio Agamben (Boukalas), they also bring relatively under-used theorists directly into discussion around Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), for instance, with Edelmann's Luhmannian perspective. Additionally, many of the articles collected here encourage our rethinking of the importance and assumptions of prominent authors

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and categories in the development of CTS and its associated (sub-)fields. Examples of the former include Boukalas on Agamben; examples of the latter include Edelmann on "communication" and Jarvis and Lister on "state terrorism".

Second, these articles also demonstrate the increasing engagement with new or unusual types of research material and strategy within CTS. Sylvester's juxtaposition of the fictional and the experienced offers a particularly interesting example of this. Novels, in her hands, emerge as vital resources for critical reflection on the specificities and dynamics of political violences. Additionally, Loadenthal makes particularly good application of established theoretical models (governmentality, the panopticon) to a context which has rarely been explored by academics: sexual infiltration as a technique of counterterrorism. These articles blaze the trail for Critical Terrorism Studies, offering new directions for theory and new areas of research for consideration.

Third, these articles also demonstrate the growing engagement with a plurality of terrorisms and counterterrorisms. Thus, very contemporary developments in efforts to combat terrorism such as the UK's Prevent Strategy (Martin) or the Boston Lockdown (Sylvester) stand alongside engagements with left-libertarian movements of the 1970s (Edelmann) and the Irish Republican hunger strikes of 1981 (O'Branski). Terrorism research itself reappears as a potential "object of knowledge" – although read differently here (Lyness) – as do the proximities between terrorism and its counter-violences (Jarvis and Lister; Loadenthal; O'Branski; Sylvester). Christine Sylvester, in particular, provides a bold incitement to Critical Terrorism Studies researchers to engage with their counterparts in Critical War Studies – such is the overlap between war and terror in the era of terror wars. These contributions, for us, demonstrate the vitality of contemporary research in this area, and leave us ever more optimistic about its current and future relevance.

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Notes on contributors

Charlotte Heath-Kelly is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Warwick. Her monograph, *Politics of Violence: Militancy, International Politics, Killing in the Name*, was published in the Routledge Interventions series, 2013. She has also published in *Security Dialogue, British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, and *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. She is currently working on a project funded by the British Academy entitled *Securing through the Failure to Secure: Reclaiming Sites of Terrorist Attack*. Email: C.Heath-Kelly@warwick.ac.uk

Lee Jarvis is a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of East Anglia. He is author of *Times of Terror: Discourse, Temporality and the War on Terror* and co-author (with Richard Jackson, Jeroen Gunning and Marie Breen Smyth) of *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. His research is in print or forthcoming in journals including *Security Dialogue, Political Studies, Millennium: Journal of International Studies, International Relations, Terrorism and Political Violence*, and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Email: leejarvis6@hotmail.com.

Christopher Baker-Beall is a Lecturer in International Relations at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests include interpretive approaches to international relations; critical approaches to security, including the internal and external security policies of the EU; and the study of terrorism.

He is currently preparing a book titled *The European Union's "Fight against Terrorism": Discourse, Policies and Identity* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming). He has published in the *Journal of Contemporary European Research* and *Cooperation and Conflict*. Email: christopher.baker-beall@ntu.ac.uk

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