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Reflections on Identity/Nationality, Positionality and Knowledge Production in researching (Counter-)Terrorism in the Global South

Thursday, 19 June 2025 10:45 (1h 30m)

How does national belonging between the researcher and fieldwork actors influence access to data for knowledge production on terrorism studies? What are the influences of power dynamics, shared identity/nationality, positionality, and social norms when researchers study terrorism within their national contexts? What are the gendered dynamics, methodology of unease or discomfort, and messiness in reflexive methodologies on (Counter-)Terrorism in the "Global South"? This special issue addresses these questions by inviting scholars and practitioners to contribute articles reflecting on the vagaries of researching terrorism and counter-terrorism.

The field of International Relations (IR) is increasingly embracing reflexivity, a shift often termed the "reflexive turn" (Hamati-Ataya 2013), with scholars focusing more on examining their positionality and addressing the entrenched inequalities, power dynamics, socio-political biases, and politics that shape research processes (Alejandro 2021; Krystalli et al. 2021; Gani and Khan 2024). Despite this shift, Gani and Khan (2024) critique positionality statements for not adequately addressing the deep-seated link between power and knowledge, arguing that they reinforce intellectual inequalities by perpetuating a racialised and colonial logic, dividing researchers racialised as "white" and those racialised as "people of color" (Gani and Khan 2024, 2). This issue is particularly notable in international security, where reflexivity, especially within terrorism studies, remains "rare" (Rodermond & Weerman 2024; Schmidt 2021, 314; Allam 2018; Cohn 2011). There are arguments that the dearth of reflexive methodologies in the field is traced to perceived socio-legal consequences (Schmit 2021), challenges in accessing primary data (Njoku 2022, Pearson and Nagarajan 2020), methodology of unease or discomfort and messiness that researchers confront when studying violent contexts (Enloe 2016, Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 126, 258; Pillow 2003). Furthermore, few studies on terrorism study have centred on the voice of Western scholars, who Njoku (2021) argues act as gatekeepers and contribute to silencing African scholarly voices in terrorism scholarship.

This is so given that since the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania, the '9/11' attacks and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the proliferation of terrorist groups in Africa and the Middle East, scholars from the "Global South" have made important contributions to the field of terrorism studies through theoretical, conceptual, and empirical works. However, these scholars have faced methodological and disciplinary or professional challenges in scholarship on terrorism as such, Jackson et al. (2011: 12) highlighted how the embeddedness of academics within these dominant structures of power (political, ideological and economical) could constitute a form of 'organic' intellectualism – in a Gramscian sense – where academics function within and benefit from the prevailing power structures where the role of the intellectual becomes that of providing helpful policy advice whether to states situated in the Global North or to intergovernmental organisations.

Scholars from the "Global North" with institutional affiliations in the "Global North" have been returning to their "home" countries to study terrorism (Oyawale, 2022). These scholars, often referred to as "Thirdworlders", "academic homecomers", or "diasporic researchers" (Adebayo and Njoku 2023, Behl 2017, Mandiyanike 2009, McFarlane-Morris 2020, Ite, U 1997), have developed a unique positionality known as betweenness—they are neither outsiders nor insiders (McFarlane-Morris 2020, Mandiyanike 2009). Even so, questions related to reflexive methodology, post-fieldwork/research reflections on terrorism and counter-terrorism studies, especially those emanating from these empirical projects, remain largely underexplored (Schmidt 2021). We know little about the accounts of "Global South" scholars studying their national contexts and the influence of shared national and ethnic identities and socio-cultural norms in the research process.

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Track Classification: Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group