

# Better understanding terrorism (BUT)

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## 1 Course Description

What do we know about the roots and motivations of ISIS, the KKK, al-Qaeda, or the Lord's Resistance Army beyond speculation, snippets of incomplete information, and stereotypes? This course considers modern-day terrorism from a theoretical and an empirical perspective. First, we study whether, when, and why terrorism has been successful to varying degrees. Second, we turn to the intimate relationship between **terrorism and the media**, exploring whether and how news coverage is so crucial for terror groups, and what this means for a free press. Third, we consider the **role of religion** in terror movements, as well as **radicalization** in historical and contemporary movements (e.g., for Nazi Germany and Islamist extremism). Fourth and final, we evaluate **counterterrorism strategies** and their empirical track records, contrasting force- and hearts-and-minds-based approaches.

Although the phenomenon of terrorism has been studied from descriptive and theoretical viewpoints, many of its underlying motivations and dynamics remain difficult to pin down empirically. For example, the US alone has spent US\$8T on the 'War on Terror', only to harvest widespread hostility across many Middle Eastern countries. Why is that so and what could be done to avoid such undesirable consequences?

## 2 Course Overview

Beyond the segments outlined above, this course discusses

- what sets terrorism apart from other, more traditional types of warfare;
- how the public, commentators, and researchers assess and interpret terrorism;
- what constitutes 'success' for a particular group, understanding the consequences of terrorism;
- the extraordinary role of media attention for terror groups;
- the role of religious and cultural perspectives in terrorism; and
- the theoretical background and empirical success of counterterrorism strategies.

In the process, we will see examples for empirical strategies to isolate causal relationships from correlations, such as **natural experiments**, **instrumental variables**, and identification through **regression discontinuity design** (RDD). Our goal is that you will come away with a better understanding of what we do and don't know about al-Qaeda and ISIS, but also about the IRA, ETA, the KKK, and white supremacists.

Active participation, intellectual openness, critical thinking, and dialogue constitute key elements in this course.

### 3 Course Schedule

1. Conceptualizing terrorism
2. Does terrorism work? If so, when, how, and why?
3. Terrorism and the media
4. Religion, radicalization, and stereotypes
5. Counterterrorism strategies, contrasting force-based and hearts-and-minds-based approaches

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