

**ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL**
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
*Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026*.Page#.4664-4674
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

# Re-Engineering Security Discourse: A Tri-Layer Framework on Political Framing, Organizational Cohesion, and the Perceptual Drivers of Terrorism

**Farda Shahzad**
Lecturer in Department of Criminology
The University of Lahore-Pakistan.
fardaahmad1216@gmail.com
Corresponding Author: farda.shahzad@crim.uol.edu.pk
**Dr. Muhammad Faisal Khan**
Associate Professor/Head, Department of Criminology
The University of Lahore
**Muhammad Sajjad Baloch**
PhD Scholar in Peace and Counter-Terrorism Studies
Minhaj University of Lahore-Pakistan

**Abstract**
*Contemporary terrorism studies remain divided between critical constructivist paradigms—which treat political violence as a socially constructed label—and rational-choice models that focus on group mechanics, tactical efficacy, and state sponsorship (Abrahms, 2012; Stampnitzky, 2013). This paper bridges this divide by introducing an integrated Tri-Layer Framework. The framework connects structural push factors like governance failures and systemic inequality (Crenshaw, 1981; Wiktorowicz, 2005) with perceptual amplification driven by political agenda-setting, elite manipulation, and media sensationalism (Criado, 2017; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996), while also accounting for the internal dynamics, principal-agent friction, and transactional mechanics that lead to militant disillusionment and defection (Popovic, 2015; Shapiro, 2013). Combining a critical review of security literature with empirical insights from five in-depth interviews across elite and public perspectives, the study examines how political actors and media outlets manipulate security discourses to shape public priorities. Ultimately, the findings reveal a key divergence: while elite agendas and media narratives dictate public anxiety and policy focus, actual group survival and member defection are dictated by transactional incentives, psychological weariness, and targeted state intervention (Becker, 2017; Cronin, 2009).*

***Keywords:*** *Terrorism Studies, Constructivism, Rational Choice, Principal-Agent Theory, Political Framing, Media Sensationalism, Organizational Defection, Tri-Layer Framework.*

**1. Introduction**

Understanding political violence requires examining both the material realities of militant organizations and the discursive mechanisms through which states, experts, and media outlets frame terrorism (Bourdieu, 1991; Hoffman, 2006). A critical gap in current security literature is the analytical divide between constructivist approaches—which interrogate how security language is politically manufactured (Stampnitzky, 2013; Weinberg et al., 2004)—and rationalist/organizational models—which treat violent groups as strategic utility-maximizers optimizing for survival or political concessions (Abrahms, 2008; Pape, 2003).

- **The Constructivist Paradox:** Constructivist frameworks demonstrate how elite actors shape security language to legitimize state authority, expand counter-terrorism budgets, and influence electoral outcomes (Mulloy, 2015; Wilkinson, 2011). However, by focusing heavily on discourse and the creation of state-centric labels, these models often marginalize physical violence, victim experiences, and the internal operational dynamics of militant groups (English, 2016).
- **The Rationalist Deficit:** Quantitative rational-choice models provide empirical clarity regarding group organizational structures, target selection, and de-escalation trajectories (Abrahms, 2006; Becker, 2017; Popovic, 2015). Yet, they often rely on rigid assumptions—treating violent actors as pure utility-maximizers while overlooking non-rational drivers such as public panic, emotional framing, media sensationalism, and the manipulative role of state intelligence agencies (Criado, 2017; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996).

To reconcile these theoretical blind spots, this study addresses two central research questions:

- **RQ1 (Political & Public View):** How do politicians, media outlets, and security experts shape public perceptions of "terrorism," and why does political discourse diverge from the material realities of violence?
- **RQ2 (Group & Fighter View):** How do internal group structures, target choices, principal-agent dynamics, and relations with state sponsors influence organizational cohesion, tactical efficacy, and defection?

## 2. Literature Review: The Theoretical Divide

| Dimension | Constructivist Paradigm | Rational-Choice / Principal-Agent Paradigm | Tri-Layer Framework (Synthesis) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Key Scholars** | Stampnitzky (2013); Mulloy (2015); Weinberg et al. (2004) | Abrahms (2006, 2012); Popovic (2015); Becker (2017); Shapiro (2013) | Integrated Synthesis Framework |
| **Core Analytical Focus** | Discourse, language, elite framing, and the creation of "anti-knowledge." | Group structure, principal-agent dynamics, target choice, and binary outcome metrics. | Integrated System: Root conditions, elite framing, and internal group breakdown mechanics. |
| **Key Strengths** | Deconstructs political agendas, elite power dynamics, and security rhetoric. | Empirical modeling of organizational mechanics, command chains, and behavioral strategies. | Bridges political discourse with real-world violent mechanics and agency dynamics. |
| **Major Limitations** | Marginalizes physical violence, casualties, and internal group dynamics. | Overlooks emotional drivers, media bias, and state proxy manipulation. | Requires extensive qualitative validation across diverse insurgent contexts. |

PARADIGM DIVIDE IN LITERATURE

▼

CONSTRUCTIVISM
(Stampnitzky, 2013; Zulaika)
- Focus: Language & framing
- Strength: Exposes elite agendas
- Weakness: Ignores physical violence

▼

RATIONAL-CHOICE
(Abrahms, Popovic, Shapiro)
- Focus: Command structures & tactics
- Strength: Empirical mechanics
- Weakness: Ignores emotion & media bias

▼

CRITICAL THEORETICAL GAP

Fails to account for both political manipulation
AND internal organizational mechanics

▼

SYNTHESIS: THE TRI-LAYER FRAMEWORK

**LAYER 1**: Structural Push Factors (Governance failure, socio-economic grievances)
**LAYER 2**: Perceptual Amplification (Elite agenda-setting, threat inflation, media clickbait)

**LAYER 3**: Internal Dynamics & Disillusionment (Principal-agent loss, transactional loyalty)

**2.1 Constructivism and the Creation of "Anti-Knowledge"**

In *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"*, Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) argues that terrorism is a politically constructed concept rather than an objective reality. She demonstrates how political violence shifted from an "insurgency" framework in the 1970s—where actors were viewed as rational bargaining agents—to a post-9/11 state of "anti-knowledge," wherein analyzing the root causes of violence was condemned as sympathizing with evil (Mulloy, 2015). This conceptual evolution mirrors Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power, where state elites deploy specialized language to define legitimate versus illegitimate state violence. However, while Stampnitzky (2013) and Zulaika and Douglass (1996) illustrate how security experts and state actors build authoritative language, their frameworks lack empirical instruments to explain how militant organizations adapt, survive, or collapse when subjected to operational pressures (Cronin, 2009).

**2.2 Group Structure, State Proxy Dynamics, and Principal-Agent Friction**

Addressing internal organizational mechanics, Milos Popovic (2015) evaluates why proxy groups defect against state sponsors using principal-agent theory. Popovic asserts that weakly structured, decentralized groups (e.g., Jaish-e-Mohammad) experience severe command-and-control breakdown, leading to defection when state sponsors apply coercive pressure. Conversely, highly disciplined, centralized networks with short delegation chains (e.g., Lashkar-e-Taiba) maintain organizational cohesion and compliance even during state policy shifts (Popovic, 2015).

This aligns with Jacob Shapiro's (2013) *terrorist's dilemma*, which establishes that violent group leaders face an unavoidable trade-off between operational security and financial control over operatives. However, Popovic (2015) treats organizational fragmentation largely as an internal defect. In doing so, he understates how state intelligence services intentionally split proxy networks to maintain leverage, while assuming leaders maintain control primarily through financial incentives rather than social or ideological capital (Bloom, 2005; Wiktorowicz, 2005).

**2.3 Strategic Efficacy and Tactical Choices**

Evaluating strategic outcomes, Max Abrahms (2006, 2012) demonstrates that substate campaigns targeting civilians almost universally fail to achieve macro-political concessions. Analyzing 125 substate campaigns, Abrahms reveals that guerrilla campaigns against military targets succeed far more frequently than terrorist campaigns against civilian targets (Abrahms, 2012). Abrahms (2008) posits that civilian targeting acts as a flawed communication strategy: target countries infer from extreme methods that the group harbors "maximalist" or non-negotiable goals, causing governments to resist compliance. This directly challenges Robert Pape's (2003) strategic logic model, which asserts that coercion through suicide terrorism yields major political concessions. Nevertheless, Abrahms relies on official foreign terrorist organization (FTO) lists—introducing political framing bias—and assumes group goals remain static (English, 2016). By reducing outcomes to a binary of political success or failure, his model overlooks how tactics are deployed for immediate organizational survival, inter-group competition, and local recruitment (Bloom, 2005).

**2.4 De-escalation Mechanics and Media-Driven Saliency**

Addressing de-escalation, Michael Becker (2017) categorizes declines in violence into *imposed declines* (state coercion) and *elective declines* (voluntary operational pauses). Yet, assuming groups pause

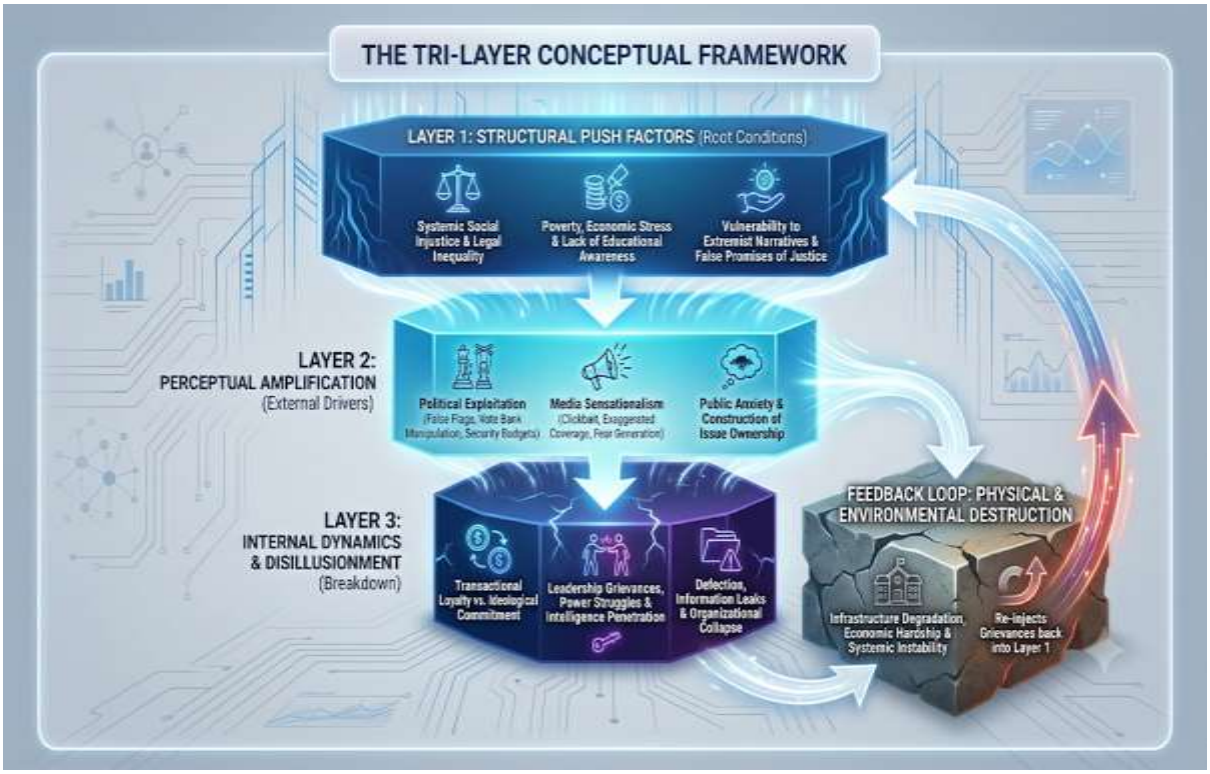
violence voluntarily to signal negotiation readiness overlooks how ceasefires are frequently deployed as tactical deception to rearm and regroup (Cronin, 2009; Wilkinson, 2011).

Connecting tactics to public perception, Henar Criado (2017) demonstrates that attack frequency alone does not drive public concern; rather, public saliency spikes when right-wing political parties leverage "issue ownership" to emphasize security. Nevertheless, Criado assumes rational behavior among voters and elites, neglecting the non-rational impact of commercial media sensationalism and public anxiety (Hoffman, 2006; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996).

**3. The Theoretical Framework: The Tri-Layer Model**

To reconcile these theoretical gaps, this study utilizes a **Tri-Layer Conceptual Framework** that maps political violence as a continuous cycle driven by structural push factors, external perceptual amplification, and internal organizational breakdown (Crenshaw, 1981; Popovic, 2015; Stampnitzky, 2013).

**THE TRI-LAYER CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**




1. **Layer 1: Structural Push Factors (Root Conditions):** Systemic governance failures, legal inequality, poverty, and marginalization create an environment conducive to radicalization (Crenshaw, 1981; Wiktorowicz, 2005). When state institutions fail to guarantee legal fairness, vulnerable individuals become receptive to violent recruiters offering alternative identities, security, or financial compensation (Bloom, 2005; Hoffman, 2006).

2. **Layer 2: Perceptual Amplification (External Drivers):** Once violence occurs, its social impact is mediated by political elites and news organizations (Criado, 2017; Stampnitzky, 2013):
    - *Political Exploitation:* Elite figures leverage threat inflation to mobilize voters, justify expanding counter-terrorism budgets, or pass restrictive legislation (Mulloy, 2015; Wilkinson, 2011).
    - *Media Sensationalism:* Commercial news outlets exaggerate violent incidents using sensationalized coverage to maximize ratings, amplifying public panic (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996).
3. **Layer 3: Internal Dynamics and Disillusionment (Breakdown):** While violent organizations project ideological cohesion, internal loyalty is often highly transactional—sustained through financial stipends, coercion, or social patronage (Shapiro, 2013). Cohesion breaks down due to command-and-control friction, leadership corruption, state intelligence penetration, or member disillusionment, leading to defection (Becker, 2017; Popovic, 2015).
4. **Feedback Loop:** The physical destruction resulting from violence damages social infrastructure, deepening structural poverty and reinforcing Layer 1 push factors (Crenshaw, 1981; English, 2016).

## 4. Methodology & Primary Data

This study employs a mixed qualitative methodology combining a critical thematic review of secondary security literature with primary empirical data from five semi-structured interviews conducted with academic experts, public observers, and graduate researchers.

**Table 1: Profile of Interview Participants**

| ID | Participant Name | Role / Professional Background | Key Analytical Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| **P1** | Participant 1 | Corporate Professional, Public Observer | Political Manipulation, Media Commercialization, State Discourse |
| **P2** | Participant 2 | Associate Professor of Criminology | Institutional Reforms, Foreign Intervention, Selective Prosecution |
| **P3** | Participant 3 | Counter-Terrorism Graduate Student | False-Flag Operations, Counter-Intelligence, Mercenary Loyalty |
| **P4** | Participant 4 | Environmental Sciences Student | Institutional Injustice, Psychological Factors, Security Concerns |
| **P5** | Participant 5 | Environmental Sciences Student | Structural Poverty, Media Disinformation, Environmental Impact |

**5. Empirical Findings & Analysis**

**MECHANICS OF MILITANT GROUP DEFECTION**

**PRIMARY MOTIVATIONS (Root Drivers)**

1. Poverty & Financial Need
2. Perceived Social Injustice
3. Coercive Brainwashing

**STRUCTURAL BREAKDOWN DRIVERS (Internal Friction)**

1. Leadership & Internal Power Struggles
2. Strategic & Ideological Misalignment
3. State Intelligence Penetration

**DEFECTION & INFORMATION LEAKS (Final Outcome)**

1. Acting as Counter-Intelligence Double Agents
2. Desertion & Exit for a Normal Life

**5.1 RQ1: Political Exploitation, Media Sensationalism, and Public Perception**

The empirical data demonstrates that public perceptions of violence are heavily shaped by political elites and commercial news channels (Criado, 2017; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996).

**Political Framing and Elite Agenda-Setting**

Respondents noted that political elites routinely frame terrorism to serve electoral or fiscal interests, validating critical constructivist assertions (Stampnitzky, 2013; Wilkinson, 2011). As Participant 1 stated: *"Politicians use terrorism as a tool... to pass laws, rules, and get work done through government agencies according to their own will. In the future, if there's something regarding security agencies, they can use it as a reference for budget allocation..."*

Participant 3 highlighted strategic agenda-setting during political crises:

*"When politicians are involved in a controversy that could harm their image, they sometimes orchestrate a false flag operation to divert public attention... Public sentiment shifts, and people forget the original controversy."*

Furthermore, participants observed that the label "terrorist" is applied selectively depending on state self-interest (Weinberg et al., 2004). P1 noted:

*"For Europeans or Americans, terrorism is defined as anything that does not protect their self-interest... In Kashmir, Pakistanis call them freedom fighters, but from India's perspective, they are terrorists."*

**Media Sensationalism and Perceptual Distortion**

Media reporting plays an active role in inflating risk perceptions beyond objective threat levels (Criado, 2017). (P5) observed:

*"I feel that in Pakistani media... nearly 70% is fake news, and only about 30% is correct. When children watch these broadcasts, it instills fear and terror in them... damaging our country's image."*

Participant 4 added that media over-exposure can normalize violent actors:

*"Even if someone is a terrorist or a gang member, because they start appearing on the media so much, it becomes normalized, and they start gaining popularity..."*

**5.2 RQ2: Internal Group Dynamics, Financial Transactionalism, and Defection Mechanics**

The empirical findings challenge purely ideological explanations of militant behavior, confirming that group cohesion relies heavily on transactional incentives, command structures, and state intelligence dynamics (Popovic, 2015; Shapiro, 2013).

**Structural Push Factors Driving Recruitment**

In alignment with Layer 1, participants identified socio-economic deprivation and legal failures as primary drivers of recruitment (Crenshaw, 1981; Wiktorowicz, 2005). Participant 2 emphasized:

*"Being a sociologist, what comes to my mind first is inequality or social injustice... foreign entities exploit poverty or injustice within society."*

Participant 4 linked participation directly to institutional failures:

*"Because of social injustice, people search for justice somewhere... saying, 'If the law won't give it to us, we'll take it into our own hands.'"*

**Transactional Loyalty and Defection Dynamics**

Contrary to assumptions of unyielding ideological commitment, internal group loyalty is highly vulnerable to financial friction and intelligence penetration (Becker, 2017; Shapiro, 2013). P2 identified three primary triggers for defection:

1. **Intelligence Penetration:** *"State intelligence might have placed an insider or converted someone within the group."*
2. **Ethical Disillusionment:** *"A fighter joining the BLA might initially believe he is fighting a war for independence. But if he realizes that the group is indiscriminately killing civilians... he undergoes a realization: 'This isn't a war for freedom...'"*
3. **Financial Disputes:** *"If financial gains or monetary compromises fall through, that becomes a primary factor for disloyalty."*

Participant 3 underlined the mercenary nature of fighter retention:

*"Mercenaries are not loyal to a cause; they are only loyal to money. They receive money from terrorism groups, but when state agencies approach them and offer more money... they leak information."*

## 6. Synthesis: Bridging Secondary Literature and Empirical Data

**Table 2: Comparative Synthesis – Secondary Literature vs. Primary Empirical Findings**

| Theoretical Theme | Secondary Literature Framework | Primary Empirical Finding | Tri-Layer Framework Mapping |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Political Discourse & Framing** | **Stampnitzky (2013); Weinberg et al. (2004):** "Terrorism" as an invented label creating "anti-knowledge." | Elites manipulate threat definitions to secure votes, pass budgets, and label political rivals. | **Layer 2:** Perceptual Amplification (Political Exploitation) |
| **Media Impact & Saliency** | **Criado (2017); Zulaika & Douglass (1996):** Saliency driven by political competition and news framing. | Commercial clickbait, graphic imagery, and panic distort national security realities. | **Layer 2:** Perceptual Amplification (Media Sensationalism) |
| **Group Dynamics & Defection** | **Popovic (2015); Shapiro (2013):** Defection stems from long delegation chains and monitoring costs. | Defection driven by state intelligence penetration, financial disputes, and ethical realization. | **Layer 3:** Internal Dynamics & Disillusionment |
| **Strategic Goals & Tactics** | **Abrahms (2006, 2012); Pape (2003):** Attacking civilians signals maximalist goals and causes failure. | Attacks driven by immediate financial survival, inter-group competition, or proxy manipulation. | **Layer 1 & Layer 3:** Push Factors & Financial Transactionalism |

## 7. Conclusion

By synthesizing constructivist critiques with rationalist and principal-agent models, this study provides a holistic framework for analyzing political violence (Abrahms, 2012; Popovic, 2015; Stampnitzky, 2013). While constructivist models explain how elites manipulate fear and label political opponents (Bourdieu, 1991; Mulloy, 2015), rationalist models clarify internal mechanics and command vulnerabilities (Cronin, 2009; Shapiro, 2013).

The primary qualitative data and comparative literature demonstrate that political violence operates through a continuous feedback cycle (Crenshaw, 1981; Popovic, 2015):

1. **Structural failures** (poverty, legal neglect) create vulnerabilities that militant recruiters exploit (Wiktorowicz, 2005).
2. **Political elites and media networks** amplify threat levels to drive viewer engagement, secure security budgets, and consolidate power (Criado, 2017; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996).
3. **Militant cohesion** remains fragile and transactional, collapsing when command structures fragment, financial payments stall, or state intelligence services intervene (Becker, 2017; Shapiro, 2013).

Future counter-terrorism policy must look beyond purely kinetic responses to address structural push factors, regulate sensationalist media coverage, and exploit the financial and principal-agent vulnerabilities that drive organizational defection (Abrahms, 2008; Wilkinson, 2011).

**References**


1. **Abrahms, M. (2006).** Why terrorism does not work. *International Security*, 31(2), 42–78. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.2.42
2. **Abrahms, M. (2008).** What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy. *International Security*, 32(4), 78–105. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.78
3. **Abrahms, M. (2012).** The political effectiveness of terrorism revisited. *Comparative Political Studies*, 45(3), 366–393. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011433104
4. **Becker, M. (2017).** Why violence abates: Imposed and elective declines in terrorist attacks. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(2), 215–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1011799
5. **Bloom, M. (2005).** *Dying to kill: The allure of suicide terror*. Columbia University Press.
6. **Bourdieu, P. (1991).** *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
7. **Crenshaw, M. (1981).** The causes of terrorism. *Comparative Politics*, 13(4), 379–399. https://doi.org/10.2307/421717
8. **Cronin, A. K. (2009).** *How terrorism ends: Understanding the decline and demise of terrorist campaigns*. Princeton University Press.
9. **Criado, H. (2017).** What makes terrorism salient? Terrorist strategies, political competition, and public opinion. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(2), 236–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1008628
10. **English, R. (2016).** *Does terrorism work? A history*. Oxford University Press.
11. **Hoffman, B. (2006).** *Inside terrorism* (2nd ed.). Columbia University Press.
12. **Mulloy, D. J. (2015).** Lisa Stampnitzky. Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism" [Book Review]. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(3), 600–601. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1055981
13. **Pape, R. A. (2003).** The strategic logic of suicide terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3), 343–361. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540300073X
14. **Popovic, M. (2015).** The perils of weak organization: Explaining loyalty and defection of militant organizations toward Pakistan. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(11), 919–937. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1063838
15. **Shapiro, J. N. (2013).** *The terrorist's dilemma: Managing violent organizations*. Princeton University Press.
16. **Stampnitzky, L. (2013).** *Disciplining terror: How experts invented "terrorism"*. Cambridge University Press.
17. **Wilkinson, P. (2011).** *Terrorism versus democracy: The liberal state response* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
18. **Weinberg, L., Pedahzur, A., & Hirsch-Hoefler, S. (2004).** The challenges of conceptualizing terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(4), 777–794. https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768
19. **Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005).** *Radical encounters: Islamic activism and the attraction of extremism*. Ohio University Press.

20. **Zulaika, J., & Douglass, W. A. (1996).** *Terror and taboo: The folly, terms, and consequences of news*. Routledge.