

SUMMARY

2 October 2025



THE CHANGING NATURE OF TERRORISM

IN COOPERATION WITH THE DEFENSE MINISTRY BMLV.



Österreichisches Institut
für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute
for International Affairs

KEYNOTE:

Dr. Levi West

Australian National University

MODERATION:

Dr. Daniela Pisoiu

oiip

DATE:

2 October 2025

VENUE:

oiip, Währinger Straße 3/12, 1090 Wien

SUMMARY:

Olena Butnyk

KEYWORDS:

Strategic Terrorism • October 7 • State-Sponsored Terrorism • Youth Radicalisation
• Hybrid Ideologies • Asymmetric Warfare • Counterterrorism Policy • International
Security • Strategic Overreaction

WICHTIGSTE ERKENNTNISSE

1 Terrorismus als strategischer Katalysator in der Weltpolitik

Terroristische Anschläge können Auslöser für Systemkrisen, politische Polarisierung und strategische Fehlentscheidungen von Staaten sein, bzw. weitreichende regionale und globale geopolitische Folgen haben. Beispiele sind das Attentat von Sarajevo 1914 bzw. der 7. Oktober 2023.

2 Der israelisch-palästinensische Krieg als Fallstudie für strategisches Scheitern

Dr. West bezeichnete Israels militärische Reaktion auf den 7. Oktober als strategisch kontraproduktiv. Wie die US-Invasion im Irak hat auch dieser Krieg zu internationalem Reputationsverlust, innenpolitischer Spaltung und einer neuen Generation radikalisierten Akteure geführt.

3 Rückkehr staatlicher Akteure und hybride Gewaltformen

Staaten wie Iran oder Russland nutzen zunehmend Terrorismus als Werkzeug geopolitischer Einflussnahme. Neben klassischem „state sponsorship“ treten neue Formen staatlich unterstützter extremistischer Netzwerke – insbesondere im rechtsextremen Spektrum – auf.

4 Jugendradikalisierung als alarmierender Trend

Das Durchschnittsalter terroristischer Täter sinkt dramatisch. Immer häufiger sind Minderjährige in extremistische Gewalt verwickelt – teils als Täter, teils als Opfer von Manipulation, Online-Grooming und ideologischer Instrumentalisierung durch digitale Subkulturen.

5 Ideologische Fragmentierung und „extremely online“ Terrorismus

Die Ideologien moderner Extremisten sind zunehmend hybrid, widersprüchlich und von Internetkultur geprägt. Begriffe wie „nihilistic violent extremism“ beschreiben Bewegungen, die weniger politisch motiviert sind als durch Zynismus, Narzissmus und digitale Memekultur angetrieben werden.

6 Notwendigkeit einer strategischen Neuausrichtung der Terrorismusbekämpfung

Trotz geopolitischer Schwerpunktverlagerungen (z. B. hin zu Großmachtkonflikten) bleibt Terrorismus ein dynamisches Sicherheitsrisiko. West fordert, die nach 9/11 aufgebauten Kapazitäten nicht aufzugeben, sondern sie an das neue, komplexe Bedrohungsumfeld anzupassen.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Terrorism as a Strategic Catalyst in Global Politics

Terrorist attacks can have disproportionate geopolitical consequences—from Sarajevo 1914 to October 7, 2023, serving not only as tactics of asymmetric warfare but as triggers of systemic crises, polarization, and strategic miscalculations by states.

2 The Israeli-Palestinian War as a Case Study in Strategic Failure

West argued that Israel's prolonged military campaign in Gaza mirrors the strategic errors of the Iraq War: eroding legitimacy, deepening domestic polarization, and producing a new generation of radicalized actors rather than eliminating threats.

3 The Return of State-Sponsored and Hybrid Terrorism

States such as Iran and Russia increasingly employ terrorism and proxy networks as tools of influence. Beyond classical state sponsorship, new hybrid forms of state-enabled extremist movements, especially within the far-right milieu, are emerging.

4 Youth Radicalisation as a Growing Threat

The average age of terrorist offenders is declining sharply. Minors are increasingly drawn into violent extremism, often as victims of online grooming, coercion, and exploitation within nihilistic and conspiratorial online subcultures.

5 Ideological Fragmentation and the Rise of “Extremely Online” Terrorism

Modern extremist ideologies are fluid, contradictory, and meme-driven. Terms such as nihilistic violent extremism capture movements defined less by coherent ideology than by internet culture, gamification, and self-referential violence.

6 The Need for Strategic Recalibration in Counterterrorism

Despite shifting geopolitical priorities, terrorism remains an adaptive threat. West emphasized the importance of maintaining and updating post-9/11 counterterrorism capabilities to address the increasingly diffuse and hybrid character of modern terrorism.

The Changing Nature of Terrorism.

Terrorism as a Strategic Shock: From Sarajevo to October 7

Dr. Levi West opened his keynote by reframing terrorism not merely as a security threat but as a strategic phenomenon, capable of disrupting political systems, accelerating instability, and triggering global crises. He drew a historical parallel between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, which catalyzed World War I through a chain reaction of alliance entanglements, and more recent events such as the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

These incidents, West argued, exemplify terrorism's unique ability to act as a force multiplier, with limited operational input but disproportionate strategic effect. The October 7 attacks not only inflicted immediate civilian casualties but also reshaped regional power dynamics, destabilized Israeli domestic politics, and reignited global debates on the legitimacy of violence, state response, and international law.

Strategic Overreaction and the Logic of Failure

A core theme of the lecture was the strategic mismanagement of terrorism by democratic states. West criticized the Israeli government's prolonged and force-heavy response in Gaza, drawing parallels to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Both cases, he suggested, illustrate how overreaction to terrorism can lead to a loss of international legitimacy, deepened political polarization at home, as well as the emergence of a new generation of radicalized individuals. Rather than diminishing the threat, such strategies often reproduce the conditions that enable extremism, especially when civilian populations suffer and military objectives remain unclear or unachievable.

The Re-Emergence of State-Sponsored and Hybrid Terrorism

While traditional counterterrorism frameworks often assume non-state actors, Dr. West emphasized the increasing involvement of state actors, either directly or through proxies. Countries like Iran and Russia have actively used or supported terrorist methods and actors to further geopolitical aims.

A more recent development is the state-enabled far-right extremism in parts of Europe and North America.

This blurring of lines between state and non-state complicates attribution, deterrence, and international responses.

The Rise of Youth Radicalisation and Online Extremism

Perhaps the most alarming trend discussed was the growing involvement of minors in terrorism. Citing several recent cases, West noted that the average age of perpetrators is falling. Online grooming and peer-driven radicalisation play a major role, and young people are drawn into extremist ideologies that combine nihilism, conspiracy thinking, and pop-cultural references. He described this as a form of "extremely online terrorism" where ideology is less defined by political goals and more by a toxic blend of alienation and performative violence.

This presents serious challenges for prevention, prosecution, and rehabilitation, especially when minors are simultaneously perpetrators and victims.

The Strategic Ambiguity of Terrorism and the Role of Lone Actors

Dr. West concluded his keynote by reflecting on the inherent lack of strategic coherence in terrorism. Contrary to popular belief, he argued, most terrorist attacks are not embed-

ded in clear, long-term strategies. Instead, their main function is to provoke overreactions, generate confusion, and disrupt rational policy-making in the targeted society.

Rather than being part of a unified political project, terrorism operates as a destabilizing force that thrives on ambiguity. Its power lies not in military success but in how it alters decision-making environments, often pushing states toward self-damaging choices.

One of the most significant evolutions in this dynamic, according to West, is the rise of lone-actor terrorism. Many perpetrators today have no formal ties to any organization. They may never have met another extremist in person, but become radicalized through online ecosystems, echo chambers, and algorithmic exposure to violent ideologies. Their motivations are often a mix of ideological sampling, personal grievance, and social alienation. This shift complicates traditional counterterrorism approaches, which rely on identifying networks and tracing financial or communication links. As West stressed, these individuals act alone but are not isolated, they are part of a diffuse digital culture of extremism that resists easy categorization or containment.

He urged policymakers not to overlook these threats simply because they are small-scale or lack organizational backing. On the contrary, their very unpredictability and decentralization make them potent instruments of disruption, especially in polarized political environments where even minor incidents can have outsized effects.

Conclusion

Dr. West's keynote delivered a sobering yet nuanced analysis of terrorism in the 21st century. Far from being a relic of the past, terrorism remains a dynamic, adaptive phenomenon, shaped by state actors, and generational shifts in ideology. Addressing this evolving threat re-

quires more than law enforcement: it demands ideological literacy, and resilience against overreaction.

IMPRESSUM:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,
Austrian Institute for International Affairs
A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12,
www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

Copyright © 2025

