**How Terrorism Is Taught Around the World**

9/11 turned terrorism into a hot topic. This is what students learn about it in academia.

In Europe the focus in the classroom is on case studies. In the [U.S.](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/united-states), educators emphasize statistics and data analysis. And in farther flung places such as Sri Lanka, which [faced decades of civil war](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-05-18/on-the-8-year-anniversary-of-civil-wars-end-sri-lankas-political-fate-looks-grim), the approach remains rooted in academic theory.

Terrorist incidents may be declining worldwide, but the interest in learning about the topic is growing globally, say educators around the world. Since the deadliest terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on Sept. 11, 2001, students have wanted to know more about terrorism, and classes are becoming popular, especially in America.

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"I've seen an incredible increase in interest in this topic coming from students and there was just about no interest prior to 9/11," says Gary LaFree, director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a research and education center at the University of Maryland.

More than [11,000](https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272241.htm) terrorist attacks occurred cross the world in 2016, killing 25,600 people and injuring around 34,000, according to START. Additionally, more than 15,500 people were kidnapped or became hostage. Terrorism has made the news in 104 countries, but three quarters of all attacks in the world took place in only five nations: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, [Nigeria](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/nigeria) and [Pakistan](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/pakistan).  
  
Terrorism remains the most important issue for leaders to solve, according to results from the [2018 Best Countries survey and rankings](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries). Approximately 35 percent of the more than 21,000 global survey respondents prioritized terrorism above income inequality, climate change, immigration, gender inequality and the refugee crisis.

Sept. 11 has made a strong impact on academic curricula.

"9/11 was a landmark event but also a declaration of war," says Praveen Abhayaratne, a [Sri Lanka](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/sri-lanka)-based professor of counterterrorism studies at Henley-Putnam University, an online university focused on security. "There was a lot of money that the U.S. was putting into [understanding what happened on 9/11] so the military and the defensive and offensive requirements that became a part of that basically expanded the need for people who understood the subject, who had studied the subject. So it really expanded the demand."

While 9/11 has shifted the focus toward a deeper understanding of the topic in academia, professors also report local troubles as having paved the way toward more interest in the study of terrorism.

"The 11 September attacks are the key thing here now, as well as the July 2005 bombings," says Conor Gearty, professor of human rights law at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), referring to the London attack [tied to al-Qaeda](http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/30/world/al-qaeda-documents-london-bombings/)that killed 52, injured hundreds, and was called "[the worst single terrorist atrocity on British soil.](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33253598)" Before these incidents, Gearty says his courses mainly focused on the issues that the [U.K.](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/united-kingdom) had with [Ireland](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/ireland).

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Recent tensions in the Middle East have also raised the interest of students and academia.

"There was obviously a huge spike after Daesh [the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State] came into the scene in Iraq," Abhayaratne says, talking about the rise of ISIS beginning in 2014.

Yet despite differing events that have spurred wanting to study terrorism, the profile of those studying the topic seems similar around the world, analysts say.

"It's mostly people who wish to work in national security or people interested in the field, such as businessmen, legal experts, lawyers, or journalists," says Ion Duvac, professor of terrorism studies in [Romania](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/romania)and founder of a graduate psychology program in national security at the University of Bucharest.

When it comes to the actual teaching of the subject, significant style differences can be noticed in Europe and America.

"European social science tends to be much more qualitative, case oriented, while the U.S. is much more focused on statistics, data collection, and data analysis," LaFree says. "Also, Europe is moving more rapidly into forensics."

In contrast, there are places with a [history of high terrorist activity](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-srilanka-war/sri-lanka-sees-new-threats-of-terrorism-muslim-extremism-idUSBRE9820I720130903)such as Sri Lanka where the topic in academia is still very much theoretical, Abhayaratne says.

"Even exams require you to reproduce for the most part whatever readings and lectures were covered and teaching is lecture based, while in the U.S. everything is more based on sequential assessment through various different types of assignments designed to achieve specific learning outcomes."

When it comes to Europe, professors say the old continent has had a longer tradition in the teaching of terrorism.

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"You had the IRA and the Red Brigade operating in Europe particularly in the 1970s and 1980s," LaFree says. "There were a few people doing work in the U.S., but I just think for the most part it wasn't getting into the educational system at all."

At the same time, academics say it's easier and more crucial for Europe to gather more information on the topic since it's geographically closer to the theaters of operation in the Middle East and North Africa.

"Europe has more foreign fighters that have come back already so the nature of the radical Islamist threat in Europe is more immediate than in the U.S.," LaFree says.

Both students and academia have benefited from an overflow of information that now makes terrorism a more palpable subject and training opportunities numerous. Yet the topic remains very complex and academia still struggles to find the perfect program in which to incorporate it. Terrorism classes are taught in various schools, from those focusing on national security and political sciences, to psychology or criminology. Teaching terrorism is challenging, professors say, because its definition varies around the world.

"We spend a lot of time coming to understand that the concept is loaded with political meaning and varies from country to country and from time to time," Gearty says.

Additionally, even different violent groups are characterized differently, depending on the political context in which professors teach.

“If I am lecturing in Europe, I would sometimes get somebody in the audience that would say, 'You're treating Hezbollah or Hamas as a terrorist organization,’ and they are more likely to see them as freedom fighters,” LaFree says.

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In coming years, professors say the study of terrorism will need to expand to incorporate new theaters of operations, as well as new methods that terrorists now use. Technological advancements challenges academia to add even more disciplines under the terrorism umbrella, such as the study of social media, computer science and cybersecurity, all which come with a new set of skills that political or social science experts do not yet possess.

“It’s a challenge for anyone to cover cyberterrorism because that involves completely different levels of technical knowledge to understand how it is done,” Abhayaratne says.

Nonetheless, paying close attention to new types of terrorist weapons is a must, academics says, more so because terrorism, although declining, tends to surface in new countries or regions that should be kept under observation and studied.

"I don't expect terrorism to disappear in the next decade," LaFree says. "On the other hand, one of the things that we know at least for the last half of century is that terrorism occurs in waves. We've seen a pretty healthy decline in terrorism over the last two and a half years worldwide and it is hard to know if this is going to last, but in the past it tended to decline and then you'd see an increase in some new parts of the world."

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