

# Interview: Lisa Stampnitzky

7 November 2016

**This interview was conducted by Tim Street, Senior Programme Officer on Oxford Research Group's Sustainable Security programme.**

In this interview Dr. Stampnitzky discusses counter-terrorism strategies during the Bush administration's 'War on Terror' including the use of torture, the problems associated with defining terrorism, Obama's track record on the use of force and approach to terrorism and what a Trump or Clinton presidency would mean for the US elite's overall thinking on terrorism and counter-terrorism.

**Q. US Army manuals have defined terrorism as 'the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature...through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear'. Does this seem to you to be a useful definition of terrorism? What objections might there be to making such a definition universal?**

## Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

There are a number of difficulties with this definition, but foremost is that it would seem to incorporate many of the activities of the US Army itself. As to whether this is a useful definition, we might ask, useful to whom? Presumably the Army itself finds this definition useful, but we can ask, *how* do they use it? To what acts is it applied, and in what way? And what other actors adopt this definition, and why?

**Q. Has it been as problematic to find agreed definitions for terms connected to terrorism e.g. counter-terrorism and insurgency? Why is language so important in these debates? Is it simply a question of cultural and social power struggles?**

Oddly, the terms “counterterrorism” and “insurgency” do not seem to share the prolonged conflicts over definition that have characterized discussions of “terrorism.” I would suggest that this is for two distinct reasons. “Counterterrorism” describes the set of activities that the state puts forward in response to terrorism. We can (and many certainly do) disagree over whether these are the *proper* responses, or whether a counterterrorism policy is misguided, counter-productive, discriminatory, or problematic in any number of other ways—but few would argue that such policies *are not* actually counter-terrorism. Insurgency, on the other hand, (as I have argued in *Disciplining Terror*), suffers less from definitional debates because, unlike “terrorism,” it does not have a moral judgment built into the concept. Whereas to call something “terrorism” is to proclaim that it is *bad*, an insurgency may be viewed either favourably or unfavourably, depending upon the context. Although I would suggest that insofar as “insurgency” has become, of late, terrorism’s “other”—meaning that it is a useful term for campaigns of violence

## Most read

**The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels**

**ORG's Vision**

**Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres**

that we do not wish to label “terrorism,” it is likely to become a more contested label.

**Q. You *argue* that the George W. Bush administration used torture ‘strategically’, in quite an open way, and that this was both a means of counteracting the development of ‘domestic and international law governing human rights and the government use of force’ and making such laws fit with their policies. Could it also be that torture was being used for other strategic ends, for example, to purposefully dehumanise and humiliate those captured in order to send a message to those seen as Washington’s enemies?**

As has become quite clear, torture is not an effective means of producing reliable intelligence. And yet, if torture is not a strategic means of achieving its stated purpose (interrogation), we must ask what other purposes does it have? The very fact that the use of torture has been openly acknowledged by the U.S.—which, again, would seem puzzling if its main purpose were to obtain information—becomes more understandable if we instead think of torture as sending a message – both to Washington’s enemies, and, I would suggest, to the American people, thereby asserting that all possible means, even those considered illegitimate, illegal, and unquestionably wrong, are being used.

**Q. Regarding terrorism studies as a field of inquiry, you’ve *written* that ‘the state has been not just the primary sponsor of knowledge-production, but also the primary consumer of research’ and that this work has often ‘explicitly’ been ‘oriented toward developing practical techniques of control’. What types of control are involved here? Moreover, what problems do you think this situation raises for academics working in this and connected areas?**

These forms of control range from violent elimination (of individuals, via assassinations/ “targeted killing,” and of groups/organizations via more conventional military interventions), to attempts at identifying individuals or communities who are deemed “suspicious” or “at risk” of terrorism, often even before any crime has been committed. This raises a number of concerns for academics working in this area. First, and somewhat narrowly, there is the question of reliability of data, especially in areas such as evaluating the success of “thwarted” plots. More generally, I would suggest that academics expand their horizon, and consider developing research whose intended audience is not necessarily the state, but the general public. While funding and other structures clearly incentivize producing research that answers the questions being asked by the state, a broader approach can aid democratic reflection upon these policies and frameworks themselves.

**Q. How would you assess / what did you find significant about the Obama administration’s track record regarding its use of force and approach to terrorism generally, for example, in relation to domestic and international law?**

While the Obama administration has been commended for its rejection of torture, there are a number of troubling continuities with the Bush administration. Obama’s rejection of torture has been presented as a policy choice by a new administration, rather than a wholesale reassertion of adherence to international law. This, together with the failure to hold accountable those who implemented policies of torture leaves open the door for future administrations to reverse the policy once again. Further, both administrations have enacted counterterrorism policies whose signature practice (torture, in the case of the Bush administration;

assassination/“targeted killing” in the Obama administration) is legally proscribed. Further, rather than conduct these practices in secret, both administrations have presented legal and political justifications for engaging in these “forbidden” practices. I suggest that this may evidence a newly emerging strategy of states towards international law, in which rather than engaging in violations characterized primarily by *hypocrisy*, states openly, or quasi-openly justify their use of forbidden practices.

**Q. You raise the issue of how various groups in the US have sought to ‘reinterpret domestic violence as a form of terrorism’ or ‘reinterpret police killings of African-Americans as a form of state terror’. How successful have these groups been in these attempts and what problems do they face? How receptive do you think the public is to such attempts to reframe what terrorism is and means?**

I think the fact that such framings have made it into the media suggests a degree of success. But such reframings, particularly in the case of [Black Lives Matter](#), have also been subject to significant backlash, with some attempting to label [Colin Kaepernick](#) and other prominent representatives of the movement as “terrorists” themselves. One of my recurring arguments has been, of course, that ‘what terrorism is and means’ is continually being redefined; the question of which particular reframings are successful is what we ought to keep an eye on.

**Q. What do you think a Trump / Clinton presidency might bring in terms of continuity and change? More broadly, what innovations and new developments do you see in US elite’s overall thinking on terrorism and counter-terrorism?**

A Clinton presidency would likely be characterized by broad continuity with the counterterrorism policies of the Obama administration. These include using the military to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria, continuing the use of drone warfare and targeted killing in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen, the use of intelligence, infiltrators, and agents provocateur to “disrupt” terror plots, and domestic and international programs aimed at countering “radicalization” and “violent extremism.” Trump, on the other hand, has promised a series of radical changes, from the resumption of torture, to banning Muslim immigration, building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, and allying with Russia against ISIS. Trump’s proposals seem motivated less by a coherent strategy than by a desire to project a forceful, almost brutal approach to his followers, explicitly defining Muslims as the enemy, and making use of force in brutal, performative ways, such as torture, “carpet-bombing,” and targeting terrorists’ families. Although there is much one might critique about Clinton’s counterterrorism proposals, they largely fall in line with current policy, and have been supported by mainstream experts and analysts.

**Lisa Stampnitzky is a lecturer in [Politics](#) at the University of Sheffield, where she teaches classes on human rights, U.S foreign policy, and more. Her current book project, *How torture became speakable*, asks how torture moved from an unspeakable evil to a legitimate policy option in the U.S. after 9/11. Her first book, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”* (Cambridge, 2013), traces the emergence of the field of terrorism expertise, and the contemporary notion of “terrorism.”**

**Share this page**



## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436  
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



Registered with  
**FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR**

## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)