We can say at least this for the U.S. response: those of us who study terrorism will never again want for data. And Perliger and Pedahzur's article is indeed a helpful contribution to the literature; I am convinced that social network analysis is useful to understanding the interior workings of terrorist groups, and that this may have policy implications. Yet I seriously doubt SNA will challenge our basic understanding of correct and effective counterterrorism policy. To the extent that our understanding is presently inadequate, it is only because policymakers dislike it. Further work that does not build on the significant, useful, compelling literature on terrorism—especially work that is dismissive of this literature—risks at least being seen as subordinate to the interests of those policymakers. It also risks irrelevance; the next time something terrible happens, we may again see an administration that ignores academia. Will our discipline ever be able to stand by its work?

My point is not to single out Perliger and Pedahzur; there have been more egregious claims against the literature. I know, as well, that convention requires us to denigrate prior research in order to make our own seem fresh and relevant. That said, given the gravity of this topic, it may be worth suspending this practice for a time. At least we might agree to avoid implying social and political scientists only discovered terrorism on September 11. This is clearly not true, and elides the fact that a significant portion of our work in response to September 11—especially immediately after—lacks the rigor and intellectual integrity of the prior literature.

I do not think we—political and social scientists—know all there is to know about terrorism. We do, however, have a solid understanding of counterterrorism policy. We should seek to affirm and build on that knowledge, rather than replace it, and perhaps take some pride that even with "mainly descriptive and qualitative methods" and "limited theoretical progress," our discipline has produced a compelling solution to a serious problem. Whether or not the patient takes the medicine is a different problem, and perhaps itself deserves study, but should not diminish or demean our work thus far.

Sincerely,
Miles Townes
Ph.D. Student,
George Washington University

A RESPONSE TO TOWNES

Dear Editor,

Usually we are thankful for any suggestions, comments or constructive criticism; this is an inherent and crucial component of the academic discourse. Unfortunately, in this case we find it difficult since Mr. Townes ignored 99% of the more important segments of our article while focusing on a relatively marginal, taken out of context, one sentence in the first paragraph. Nonetheless, the accumulation of arguments in his letter indeed deserves a constructive response. We however would like to focus on what is actually written in his letter, and our article, rather than basing our response on assumptions which do not have any ground in the criticized text.

Mr. Townes presents three main arguments. The first is that we are mistaken in contending that the theoretical progress in the field until the late 1990s was limited. However, Mr. Townes himself, in the first paragraph of his letter, admits that this is probably true. So we are puzzled by his reluctance to acknowledge this contention as it appears in our article. Does the fact that the pre-9/11 literature was (perhaps) useful for policymakers interested in devising effective counterterrorism policies make our argument about the (absence of) theoretical advancement less valid? Moreover, we never claimed that the literature was not useful in this regard (that is, helping to develop counterterrorism measures). The bottom line is that we are "blamed" of doing a disservice to the literature in the field, while Mr. Townes himself does not refute our contention. Lastly, the lack of theoretical progress until recently has been addressed by most major "terrorism" scholars, as stated by (Schmid and Jongman 1988, 62)—"Theories in the more rigorous sense of the term, with prognostic power, are non-existent."

The second argument, which is more disturbing, is that Mr. Townes truly believes that the pre-9/11 literature solved the problem of terrorism ("or at least, assembled a solid consensus as to the best, most appropriate, most effective responses to the problem of terrorism"). For one thing, social phenomena are dynamic in nature; hence, it is hard to assume that devising effective counterterrorism policies against the revolutionary left-wing European groups of the 1970s presents exactly the same set of challenges and constraints as the ones policymakers of today need to confront (without mentioning the differences in the political, cultural, technological context/environment). However, even when ignoring the differences in context, the fact is that very few if any within the academic community concur with Mr. Townes argument that we "solved the problem," even regarding groups/conflicts studied before the last decade. Martha Crenshaw herself indicated in 2001 that "(another) research area that has been neglected is the study of decision-making in the area of counterterrorism." She, as others, refers to the fact that the majority of pre-2000s counterterrorism literature has encountered difficulties or simply has not made the effort to define exactly what "counterterrorism" is and the mechanisms that it includes. Second, many academics tended to focus on the normative aspects of contending with terrorism and, at the same time, neglected to present a reliable empirical portrayal of the manner in which regimes in praxis tackle the problem of terrorism. Furthermore, only a minority of the pre-2000s studies have tried to develop a methodical or comparative framework in their attempt to analyze the effectiveness of the various counterterrorism mechanisms. Finally, there was a dearth of theoretical frameworks trying to identify and examine the variables that influence and shape the type of policies and strategies a regime might adopt in its struggle against terrorism. Hence, we find it seriously difficult to accept the notion that everything we need to know about countering terrorism was already "discovered" decades ago. On a personal note, our article is not about counterterrorism, nor does it include a substantial analysis of counterterrorism measures/policies or violent conflicts. Hence, we were somewhat puzzled at why Mr. Townes used our article to manifest his criticism of the Bush administration counterterrorism policies.

To conclude, Mr. Townes indicates his opposition to the tendency "to denigrate prior research in order to make our own seem fresh and relevant," but at the same time rejects a new stream of studies written in the last decade by arguing that "I seriously doubt SNA will challenge our basic understanding of correct and effective counter-terrorism policy." The latter contention reflects a complete misunderstanding of the nature of SNA. It is not

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a theory/concept, but a tool and analytical perspective which allows us to find new meaningful components in social processes/phenomena. SNA, as other analytical and methodological tools, was not developed to confirm or reject existing or new theoretical approaches, but to allow us evaluate them more effectively or from a different perspective. The idea that the development of new methodological/analytical tools represents an attempt to denigrate prior research seems to us as an absurd accusation. Moreover, the idea that everything is already known seems to us even more absurd and contradicts the core foundation of academic/research profession. So who is the one doing disservice to the political science literature?

Sincerely,

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U.S. Military Academy at West Point

Ami Pedahzur
University of Texas at Austin

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