THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE PROMISING: THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON COUNTER-TERRORISM[1]

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ABSTRACT

Since 9/11, research on terrorism and counter-terrorism has changed dramatically. This article briefly summarizes some positive developments in research on counter-terrorism, discusses five remaining challenges to improved study of this complex subject, and identifies three promising trends that might help researchers and policymakers to overcome these challenges.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis les attentats du 11 septembre, la recherche autour du terrorisme et du contre-terrorisme a changé de façon radicale. Cet article propose un bref aperçu de quelques changements positifs qui se sont produits dans la recherche en matière de contre-terrorisme, examine cinq points qui nécessitent d'être améliorés dans l'étude de ce sujet complexe, et élabore sur trois tendances encourageantes qui pourraient être utiles aux chercheurs et aux législateurs afin de surmonter les défis liés à ce domaine.

Since 9/11, the terrorism and counter-terrorism research landscape has changed dramatically. In this article, I briefly summarize some positive developments in research on counter-terrorism, discuss five remaining challenges to improved study of this complex subject, and identify three promising trends that might help researchers and policymakers to overcome these challenges.

THE GOOD

We know far more about terrorism and counter-terrorism today than we did 10 years ago. For instance, we now know that terrorism is not just a problem of weak and failed states. Terrorism does not just happen where people hold grievances. Instead, terrorism often happens in countries as they undergo transitions toward or away from democracy. We also know that terrorism rarely occurs in isolation from other forms of conflict, such as civil war, insurgency, or even large-scale protest. We now know that the relationships among terrorist groups — alliances or rivalries — often shape the behavior of these groups in important ways. And we also know that policy choices — to fight wars, occupy foreign lands, commit human rights violations, discriminate against large numbers of people, or to improve human rights practices and provide foreign aid to civilian populations — can influence the degree to which a country experiences terrorism. Three key trends have led to improved research on terrorism.

1. Increased volume and quality of shared knowledge

Before 9/11, even high quality research on terrorism tended to receive less attention in mainstream social science fields. This is no longer the case. As Young and Findley (2011) point out, articles on terrorism and counter-terrorism routinely appear in all of the top journals in political science. From 2002-2008, the number of articles on terrorism in the top 9 political science journals more than tripled compared with the entire 1980-2001 period. A discipline that once saw terrorism as a minor strategic nuisance now treats it as an important subject of inquiry, and this attention has produced a large number of groundbreaking studies.

2. Improved data availability and access

For scholars wishing to study terrorism, data has always been a problem. Early generations of terrorism databases were limited to one type of terrorism (e.g. transnational terrorism), proprietary, or both. Renewed

interest in the topic and the sudden inflow of financing to support related research led a number of different research groups to collect global data on terrorism. As a consequence, researchers now have access to high-quality, publicly-available data on terrorism. The Global Terrorism Database is perhaps the most widely used of these new databases. It features nearly 100,000 domestic and transnational terrorist events from 1970-2010 and is publicly available for browsing or download. It also allows users to filter incidents based on how they define terrorism. This allows researchers to make theoretically-informed choices about which types of observations to include and exclude from their studies on a highly controversial topic.

3. Narrower gap between research and policy

Another positive development in the field is the fact that policymakers are interested in and communicate about high-quality terrorism research much more today than ever before. This is perhaps largely due to significant terrorist incidents, which have led governments to invest in research consortia such as the Kanishka Project in Canada and the Department of Homeland Security Centers of Excellence in the United States. Nonetheless, a narrowing gap between research and policy through consortia like these promises to improve policy outcomes in the long run.

THE BAD

Despite recent progress, the field remains troubled by a few key research challenges. I consider five of them below.

1. Leaving the state out

One of the most ironic trends in terrorism studies is to virtually ignore the role of the state's behavior in explaining terrorist activity. Although this trend is changing (e.g. Dugan and Chenoweth 2012), few articles on terrorism actively consider how the state's behavior might encourage, provoke, or hinder terrorist activity. As a consequence, researchers have little consensus on the most effective ways to reduce terrorist violence while improving the lives of civilians and protecting minorities. Scholarship on terrorism should therefore "bring the state" back in — not just to improve collective knowledge on how state behavior affects violence, but also to address policymakers' needs in improving government legitimacy and performance in this regard.

2. Overaggregation

Some scholars do take the state into account when they study terrorist behavior. Many cross-national time-series analyses, for example, identify the regime type (e.g. democratic, authoritarian, etc.), military capabilities, human rights records, or foreign aid outlays as potential causes of terrorism. These covariates, however, are overaggregated and are often more aptly described as "characteristics" rather than "behaviors." For instance, most of these indicators are only measured annually, whereas states can often behave quite differently from week to week or month to month. From a policy perspective, it is less useful to know how a country's annual level of democracy might increase or decrease its propensity to be the target of terrorism, and more useful to know how policymakers' specific choices might affect terrorism.

3. Little attempt to compare relative effectiveness of different policies

Some researchers do attempt to break down state characteristics and look at state policies. However, they often do so by selecting a certain policy — say, targeted assassinations — and ask whether or not such policies "work." The problem is that they rarely consider what other policy choices are available and therefore do not assess how effective they are relative to their alternatives. The most important (and policy-relevant) question is not whether targeted assassinations work, for example, but whether targeted assassinations work better than any other options policymakers have at their disposal.

4. Tendency to ignore non-repressive tools

In thinking about policy options, most researchers immediately assume that such tools must be repressive in nature. Most research has therefore focused on policies such as targeted assassinations, drone strikes, collective punishment, torture, and indiscriminate repression. The focus on coercion obscures the fact that policymakers often have much wider ranges of policy options available when dealing with terrorist groups. In a study of Israeli state actions from 1987-2004, for example, Laura Dugan and I found that only conciliatory actions aimed at improving the status quo for the general Palestinian population were correlated with a reduction in Palestinian violence toward Israelis (2012). It is more realistic and potentially more fruitful, therefore, to consider the diverse set of policy tools available to policymakers aiming to reduce violence.

5. What works? Metrics of success

Most studies use a decline in terrorist attacks as evidence that a counter-terrorism policy has worked. But ascertaining policy effectiveness is harder than it sounds. A mere association between government actions and a decline in terrorism does not necessarily mean that the policy "worked." For one thing, not all terrorist attacks are equal. Ten nonlethal attacks are far less consequential than a single mass-casualty attack. Second, many other factors may explain a decline in terrorist attacks. In 2007,

terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda in Iraq declined markedly. Some observers credited the American "troop surge" with the decline, but others cited the onset of a homegrown Sunni militia and the cessation of a (largely completed) ethnic cleansing campaign in Baghdad as primary causes of the decline in AQI violence. Moreover, in some conflict environments, a decline in violence may possess a hidden implication — that a militant group is actually quite powerful in the territory in which it is based and therefore does not need to use violence to coerce compliance. Other metrics of success are more subtle, focusing on the trade-offs between ending terrorist violence and maintaining rights and privileges of democratic governance. From a more normative perspective, if a government loses popular legitimacy and subverts its own civil liberties but stamps out terrorist violence, it is difficult to argue that a given policy was successful. More comprehensive and illuminating metrics would focus not just on a decline in the number of attacks, but also on the decline in the number of violence-related fatalities and the long-term improvement of civil liberties and human rights — all while controlling for a variety of other potential confounders.

THE PROMISING

There are three trends in the field that I think will improve the field's ability to overcome the challenges I laid out above.

First, collecting disaggregated data is already helping scholars to improve empirical techniques and findings. Some scholars focus on disaggregating the actors involved (Conrad, *et al.* 2013), whereas others focus on disaggregating time (Dugan and Chenoweth 2012) and space (Berman, *et al.*, 2011). All of these efforts will help researchers to better understand the causal processes underway and make more informed policy recommendations.

Second, a recent trend is to avoid relying on a single data source — especially in quantitative analyses — and to validate all findings using several different data sources. This practice reflects a healthy skepticism of the data's validity, which is a perfectly appropriate attitude to take toward data that claims to measure a highly controversial and contested concept. By cross-validating findings on multiple different terrorism data sets, researchers are on safer ground making empirical claims that might be used to inform policy.

Third, scholars have begun to make use of the variety of technologies available to researchers today. Whether using web-crawling techniques to pull data from social media sites or running agent-based models to identify unexpected trajectories of group behavior, such tools promise to help researchers develop and test new propositions. Moreover, the field has begun to incorporate innovative methods to test causal claims. Relying on quasi-experimental study designs, for example, has the potential to identify causal associations with greater certainty than the standard typical cross-national time-series approach. Interdisciplinarity has been a positive trend in this regard, exposing terrorism researchers to a variety of different methods and approaches that can help us to better understand these complex phenomena.

CONCLUSION

The research trends described above accompany a decline in global terrorist violence. Although terrorism remains relatively common in a few countries — Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Somalia, and Colombia — it is on the decline virtually everywhere else in the world. But the fact that terrorism is largely contained to a small number of countries is likely reversible, depending to some extent on the policies states embrace. The field has come a long way in the past decade in helping to make sense of global trends, as well as national and local dynamics. By continuing to improve data collection and validation practices and using innovative, multidisciplinary approaches of inquiry, scholars can continue to correct the conventional wisdom where necessary, and perhaps even advocate for effective and just approaches to reducing global violence — whether it emanates from terrorists or states themselves.

NOTES

[1] This article is adapted from a lecture delivered at the Kanishka Project Conference in Ottawa, Canada in November 2012.

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