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Studying the “Wicked Field” of Terrorism: Starting with Basics

By Sulastri Osman

Synopsis

Much contention remains over what “studying” terrorism is all about as it struggles to establish itself as a proper field of inquiry. For terrorism study to advance as a sound academic discipline, questioning assumptions, challenging concepts and critiquing theories have to become routine.

Commentary

NOTWITHSTANDING ITS characteristic violence, terrorism is ultimately not just about security. It is a social phenomenon, and the study of it necessitates multiple approaches. Terrorism studies do tend to be blinkered by security issues, perhaps understandably so, but that does contribute to making most research too event-driven, policy-oriented and close to government stakeholders.

These do not automatically make for bad research, of course. They do, however, raise legitimate questions about academic sustainability, rigour and distance. Such knots can nevertheless be untangled, but to achieve clarity of assessment it is crucial to confront some of the major challenges that continue to plague the research field.

Struggling to be a proper field of inquiry

The study of terrorism is still a subject of debate more than a decade after 9/11 and the Bali bombings. Although there has been an explosion of terrorism-related books and articles penned to try to frame and understand the “wicked problem” of terrorism – not so much that the problems are evil, but that they are compounded, reactive, persistent and long-term – the phenomenon remains extraordinarily complex and lends itself to neither singular nor linear explanations.

It is no wonder terrorism study continues to struggle to establish itself as a proper field of inquiry. A number of its most serious scholars have in fact deemed it far from becoming its own academic discipline because, despite a growing literature, the quality of research remains poor. Several concerns noted in the 1990s, such as transient researchers, heavy reliance on second-hand data gleaned from media reports, lack of new knowledge creation and limited range of methodologies in data gathering, still persist today.

Foremost, the field lacks interdisciplinary research collaborations. As a tactic of warfare, military science and strategy provide necessary appreciation for such a stratagem, and the relevance of criminology in explaining

crimes and criminal behaviour is clear. However, as there are different dimensions to terrorism beyond immediate security concerns, it is impossible not to examine what the established fields of history, sociology and cultural anthropology have laid down in terms of a comprehensive groundwork for understanding the environments where terrorism could occur.

Theories of rational choice, collective action and social movement, among others, employed by area scholars further contextualise motivations for violence. Psychology has provided insightful glimpses into the minds of terrorists; the study of international relations helps showcase how terrorism is at times not simply about non-state actors, thus underscoring a phenomenon that benefits from analyses at different levels. Still, despite featuring quantitative and qualitative approaches, some have argued that the terrorism discipline will never become a true “science” largely because the covert nature of terrorist activities makes it difficult – although not impossible – for researchers to design social experiments in controlled settings and gather primary data.

Lack of primary data gathering

The lack of primary data gathering results in a dearth of new information and thus the continual reworking of old materials. The consequent reliance on secondary data analysis means that, at the most benign, no new knowledge is produced, and at worst, cyclical arguments reinforce research fads. Several reviewers have judged many of the research on terrorism to lack primary source analysis considering the absence of any fieldwork done. The reviewers accordingly argued that there were simply insufficient empirical evidence to test or support stated hypotheses.

Still others, having in 2006 examined thousands of peer-reviewed articles, found that only about 3-4% employed some type of empirical analysis of terrorism data and suggested that most of the work could therefore be broadly described as thought pieces, theoretical discussions or opinions.

Further underscoring this trend, another reviewer found that in published articles which identified interviews as part of the methodology, primary data from the interviews contributed minimally to the overall study with most of the research still based on secondary data analysis. Moreover, it was noted that of the interviews done, many were not systematic or structured. In addition, another analyst who insisted on more primary data gathering through interviews, maintained that methodology needs to be openly discussed and demystified to improve the data collection process.

More of such reflective reviews are necessary to identify major gaps and weaknesses in terrorism research, while debates within the field need to become more commonplace. Systematic reviews are daunting considering the gargantuan task of keeping track of all that has been written on the topic whilst accounting for the continued lack of consensus over the definition of terrorism. However, shying away from reviews would mean an enduring inability to build progressive knowledge and cumulative theories.

Long way to go for a more holistic grasp

Much good work has been done by serious scholars keen on squaring factual evidence with context, well aware of the implications their research may have on policies. Undoubtedly, more is known today about terrorist militant groups and their motivations for engaging in terrorism, about suicide bombings and pathways to radicalisation. Yet there is so much more to understand.

Taking stock of the research done thus far and addressing gaps in knowledge is therefore important. An expanding literature, unfortunately, does not reflect a more holistic grasp of the phenomenon. Helpfully, some noted scholars have over the years compiled a useful list of terrorism (sub-)topics that are either overlooked or understudied to stimulate more novel research. For terrorism study to advance as a sound academic discipline, questioning assumptions, challenging conceptual frameworks and critiquing theories have to become routine - a diagnostic practice not uncommon to other research fields. There may be unique challenges to “studying” terrorism, but that should not make the field any less engaged in self-reflection.

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