CONFLICT STUDIES AND TERRORISM STUDIES: Blending the Two to Promote Comprehensive Policy Outcomes

by Michael Davis

Since Sept. 11, 2001, a great deal of media coverage has focused on terrorist and armed groups throughout the world. Policymakers, while influenced by the media and public opinion, attempt to wade through a daily deluge of information in order to determine where to focus policy and resources. These policymakers often look to academia to support this endeavor. Two predominant fields have gained influence amongst students and faculty alike since that fateful day in 2001: Terrorism Studies and Conflict Studies. As a military officer, I have always been drawn to both fields and have seen both used by military leaders with great success. Having spent the better part of a 20-year military career both as a Special Forces officer and as an international political-military strategist, I have focused on operations and terminology such as Counterinsurgency, Counterterrorism, Direct Action, Foreign Internal Defense, Peacekeeping, and Security Sector Reform. During my year as the first U.S. Army War College Fellow at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS), I have participated in lectures, seminars, and countless discussions led by both Terrorism and Conflict Studies scholars, where I have seen experts from both fields dissect various terrorist/armed groups and actors through their respective “lenses.” While scholars in the two fields may sometimes view themselves in juxtaposition, I opine that both of these perspectives, in concert, are invaluable to policymakers.

Terrorism Studies typically focuses on the fundamental concept of terrorism, the types of terrorism, and various historical and contemporary terrorist groups, as well as the current responses to this threat. Conflict Studies is seated in a form of scholarship that avoids labeling groups and rather focuses on the nature of the group’s ideology, leadership, organizational structure, tactics, and the myriad cultural and socio-economic factors that give rise to the conflict in a given society. At its very essence, Terrorism Studies focuses on the threat and responses to the threat, whereas Conflict Studies addresses engagement, mediation, and negotiation as central tenets. Singularly, each type of dialogue limits analysis and adds to the inherent challenges facing policymakers, who must constantly balance resources and a hierarchy of security concerns. Mischaracterization of any terrorist/armed group and its aims is but one of the many factors affecting policymakers today. As Charles Tilly warned, choosing to “reify” a group only confuses the discourse, ultimately doing a “disservice to public discussion.” I suggest that today’s policymakers need the expertise of both of these fields to counter the sensationalism of terrorist/armed groups and their leaders, whether fomented by the group itself or created by the media coverage surrounding that group.
In my recent research at MIIS of the Kongra Gel/Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Boko Haram, a Nigerian terrorist/armed group, I have found that both of the aforementioned groups of scholarship are necessary components to coherent analysis. While both the PKK and Boko Haram are labeled as “terrorist organizations” and listed on the U.S. Department of State’s list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, I have found that both groups are enormously complex and require significant analysis. Using the example of Boko Haram: to some, Boko Haram is an Islamist jihadi terrorist group bent on spreading a caliphate across western Africa and with designs to attack Western targets. To others, Boko Haram is a regionally-focused insurgent group with deeply rooted ethnic, religious, and socio-economic grievances. I believe that Boko Haram displays features of both of these categorizations; therefore, both of these analyses are correct. Thus, any policy directed toward Boko Haram will require the expertise of both Terrorism experts and Conflict Studies practitioners in order to ensure a comprehensive outcome. Furthermore, I propose that blending Terrorism Studies and Conflict Studies findings will provide policymakers the ability to determine where Boko Haram or any other armed group lies in the U.S. national interest. As policymakers attempt to prioritize risks, requirements, and resources amid an ever-changing landscape of threat perceptions, the clear delineation of U.S. national interest must be the starting point. Continuing with the Boko Haram example, if policymakers were to draw their conclusions solely from one of these groups of scholars, those policymakers would risk focusing on mere portions of the issue. According to my research, Boko Haram is neither purely a terrorist group nor an insurgency. Thus, in order to determine where Boko Haram fits in the U.S. national interest, policymakers must have unbiased diagnoses drawn from a wide array of scholarship, including but not limited to the group’s goals, aspirations, ideology, and grievances, as well as a clear understanding of its leadership, organizational structure, and tactics.

The U.S. government apparatus includes several organizations that compose the Intelligence Community. In my experiences, many of these governmental bureaucracies characterize armed groups through the Realist lens. By their very nature, the departments and agencies charged with protecting the U.S. and its interests must see groups as threats and provide guidance to policymakers to facilitate mitigating those threats. Terrorism Studies provides the foundation to this Realist assessment and policy prescription with an eye toward counterterrorism based on the tactics, leadership, ideology, and aims of a group, as well as the societal factors that give rise to radicalization and recruitment. Conflict Studies offers another lens to assist policymakers. Theirs is a more holistic approach to the valuation of a given armed group, providing another assessment of the group and its components, but more importantly offering options for negotiation and engagement. Conflict Studies adds the overarching context of the society that gave rise to and/or provides the material, personnel, and ideological support to the group, with an eye toward engagement. It is the understanding of both fields—these “root causes” in a given society, coupled with the group’s specific dimensions—that provides policymakers with a more global understanding of the group in question.

The intersection of these two academic fields is currently taking place in our own armed forces. Senior U.S. military officers leading Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM identified shortcomings in their comprehension of the problems faced in each of these military endeavors. General Officers, such as David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, moved beyond “capture/kill” and included terms such as “negotiate” and “engage.” These generals demanded that their headquarters and staffs include not just counterterrorism and counterinsurgency practitioners and scholars, but also include cultural and historical experts. These prescient military thinkers understood that their perspective of the entirety of their area of operations required a far-reaching comprehension of both the antagonist group and its society—the requirement to see a problem via both the Terrorism Studies and Conflict Studies lenses. This multifaceted view was evident in 2013, when U.S. and NATO leaders in Afghanistan were simultaneously working to kill/capture Taliban commanders locally to achieve operational gains while simultaneously working on reconciliation plans and planning to open negotiations with senior Taliban leaders in Qatar to achieve strategic outcomes. The simultaneity of these two lines of operation demonstrated that senior U.S. leaders and policymakers have
embraced both “schools of thought.” Academic programs that expose the next generation of military leaders, policymakers, and pundits to both fields of study are central to policymakers and military leaders alike. The development of the next generation of experts able to use both “lenses” will continue to improve our nation’s ability to properly define a problem and determine the desired policy outcomes.

This blending of the two “lenses” was evident in 2006, when the U.S. developed the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the U.S. strategic military headquarters for Africa. U.S. AFRICOM was constructed, ensuring the inclusion of the inter-governmental framework of military, intelligence, development, and diplomatic experts. AFRICOM’s inclusive structure is indicative of the requirement for U.S. policy apparatuses to include the principal “lenses” provided by Terrorism and Conflict Studies scholars alike – a blending of the pragmatic, Realist lens and the simultaneous addition of the anthropological, geographical, and historical contexts of a given situation. As various agencies and departments within the U.S. government have restructured throughout the last decade to include multiple perspectives or “lenses,” so too should academia.

The blending of these two approaches must begin at our academic institutions. Students and scholars of both fields must overcome their ideological differences and see the benefit in one another’s expertise. University leaders should encourage experts from both fields to promote interdisciplinary communication and advocate team-teaching. A multi-disciplinary approach, promoted via academic dialogue and collaboration, would incorporate more “lenses” within each group’s analysis. Guaranteeing a thorough understanding of the entirety of the aspects affecting a given issue is crucial to ensuring quality policy development. After all, it is today’s students that will formulate tomorrow’s policy. In his article “Defining National Interest,” Lee Hamilton pointed out, “No other country in the world has such broadly defined national interests as the United States. America’s interests are at stake in every corner of the world. On every continent the U.S. has multiple political, economic, strategic, and humanitarian interests. When confronted with the many threats to the national interest we must prioritize those interests or be overwhelmed by them.”

Policymakers determine the desired strategic outcomes that drive military and diplomatic planning and the subsequent lines of operation that comprise the regional strategy. These policymakers must navigate the ever-changing interest landscape created by the conflicts we see around us. As the U.S. struggles to continue to promote a “rules-based international order” while balancing resources, both Terrorism Studies and Conflict Studies can provide policymakers with additional tools — tools that will be crucial to the effective determination of need, based on a comprehensive analysis of an armed group relative to its place in the U.S. national interest. If policymakers cannot prioritize interests, we risk, as Hamilton pointed out, being “overwhelmed by them.” Neither Terrorism Studies nor Conflict Studies is the sole answer. However, together the two provide the much needed academic rigor that will ensure policymakers have the ability to create cogent U.S. policy with clearly defined outcomes, appropriate resources, and ample authorizations to ensure that America remains at the forefront of a world where, as the 2015 National Security Strategy states, U.S. leadership promotes peace, security, and opportunity.

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