The Future of Terrorism Studies

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What role for the academic terrorism specialist after the War on Terror? In this brief paper I argue that the field of terrorism studies faces two major challenges in the decade ahead: a *reputation problem* with the academy and a *relevance problem* with the policy world. In the past, we could live with the reputation problem because we were somewhat relevant. Now it is harder to be relevant, because the intelligence community knows so much more about terrorism. Basically, professors and practitioners are drifting further apart, and that leaves terrorism scholars in the middle with some tough choices to make. My analysis proceeds in four steps: first, I describe the field; then I talk about the reputation problem, then the relevance problem, and finally I present two recommendations.

The academic terrorism field
By "terrorism field" I mean the international community of academics who specialize in terrorism. I exclude the many people who have terrorism as a side interest. This community has three characteristics of relevance to this analysis. First, it is quite small; we are talking about a few hundred specialists in Europe and North America. Second, it is interdisciplinary and segmented, and therefore lacking a clearly defined research program in which knowledge can accumulate. Third, it is institutionally "homeless," in the sense that it lacks an institution (such as university departments) that will host it in the long term. What we have instead are a few centers that depend on short term funding.

It is important to note that the field has changed surprisingly little since 9/11. Of course, there are more of us, the literature is much bigger, there are some new centers, and quite a bit more project-based funding. Still, compared to, say, the intelligence community, the conditions for academic terrorism has not changed structurally. The number of terrorism specialists in the universities remains minuscule. Much of the new literature is the product of ad-hoc research efforts by people who specialize in other topics and who have mostly gone back to doing other things. The point here is that the decade after 9/11 did not leave the field with many *institutions* or long-term benefits to show for. Now the "water is receding" and I worry for the future of the field. Two problems are particularly worrying.

The reputation problem
The first is what I call the reputation problem, which refers to the negative attitudes within the academy toward terrorism research. This is a well-known phenomenon, but it becomes harder to ignore when the demand for our research in the policy community subsides.

The first thing to note is that we are actually dealing with two different types of reputation problems: The first is with those who view terrorism field as *politically compromised*, the other is with those who see it as being *of inferior scientific quality*. The first is more common in area studies, the other in social science. Let me say a bit about Middle East studies and political science, the two communities I know best.

In Middle East Studies – I am generalizing of course – there is widespread skepticism to hard security studies in general and to terrorism studies in particular. You do not need to speak to many Middle East specialists to realize that the heart of the matter is political: the view is, to put it very crudely, that terrorism research contributes to Islamophobia and promotes a pro-American and pro-Israeli agenda. There are quality concerns too – many see terrorism studies as "lightweight" or naively positivist – but politics looms larger. It is worth noting that these attitudes have not changed much since 9/11. With some exceptions, MidEast faculty in major American universities have not done, and still do not do, substantial research on al-Qaida. Jihadism research is mostly conducted in institutes like the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point or in religious studies departments by people like David Cook.

In political science there is also skepticism to terrorism research, but it is far less pronounced, and here the concern is more about quality; specifically, that terrorism research is insufficiently rigorous. This particular reputation problem has decreased since 9/11: we have had more articles in major journals, and more senior scholars have written about terrorism. Still, terrorism *specialists* remain almost nonexistent among the tenured faculty at the top schools.

This brings me to the reason why the reputation problem matters: it affects the quality of graduate students who go into the field. The mechanism here is what I call the "reputation-exclusion loop", which works as follows: The poor reputation makes mainstream departments reluctant to hire terrorism specialists. The best PhD students thus avoid the topic because they realize it will harm their job prospects. The terrorism field then gets, on average, second-tier recruits, who produce lower-quality research, which perpetuates the reputation problem. Many of the things that our field has been criticized for - poor methods, slippy concepts, biased data, etc - are partly a result of the fact that we are not getting the best graduate students, i.e., the ones with the best methods or language skills. If we want to get better terrorism research, we need to break this vicious circle.

The relevance problem

Let me move now to what I call the relevance problem; which is that academics may have less and less to teach the intelligence community as the latter builds in-house expertise on terrorism. I have to stress that my knowledge of the intelligence world is limited, but I have a sense of the lay of the land from interacting with analysts at conferences and reading relevant secondary literature. My overall impression is that the large services have become extremely good at mapping and understanding terrorist groups. Of course, analysts were always ahead of academics on empirics, but I think the gap has increased substantially over the past 10 years. In addition, the in-house understanding of the social science of terrorism also seems to have improved. There was a time in the early 2000s when academics might have some empirics and strategic insights of direct use to analysts and other government CT specialists. Today the informational asymmetry, especially on the main threats, is enormous. I frankly doubt there is a single academic today who can teach the CIA anything about al-Qaida. Of course, scholars may contribute broader assessments or insights, but we academics should probably not overestimate our own importance. After all, why would anyone buy the macro views of someone who doesn't know the micro?

This situation is the result of two main factors. First and most important is *scale*. The intel community has grown so much more than the academic field since 9/11 that analysts

now probably outnumber academics by several orders of magnitude. This allows for much more specialization at the individual level. The second factor is the *data revolution*, i.e., the exponential growth in the amount of digitally available information about terrorist groups. Although academics also benefit from this, intel services benefit more, because they have systems in place to manage and exploit it. In academia, information management is haphazard, with each person collecting his own data, for different purposes, different lengths of time, and in different ways. And worst of all, we're not sharing.

Of course, the intel community has its own problems and limitations, but that's not the point; the point is that the practitioner *demand* for academic products seems to be decreasing and may ultimately put some of us out of work. You should now see the connection between reputation and relevance: our reputation problem gives us fewer fallback options and makes us more sensitive to demand from the policy community.

Two recommendations

So what can we do? There are no easy answers, but I have two specific suggestions that I think will make a difference.

The first is that we academics should engage more with our respective disciplines, be it political science, sociology, psychology, or something else. We can and should keep talking terrorism across disciplines, but we should spend more time in our home departments. This means participating more in the big debates within our disciplines and publishing more in mainstream journals. This may come at the expense of cross-disciplinary exchange, but I don't think we have much choice; today, interdisciplinarity is "killing" us - by perpetuating the reputation problem and making it harder for young terrorism specialists to get academic jobs.

My second recommendation is to radically alter our data management practices. We have a serious problem of knowledge accumulation in our field because we are not pooling primary sources, and we are not making our data replicable when we publish. There are two very concrete, easy measures we can take to change this. One is to launch a co-ordinated effort to build online repositories of primary sources, be it ideological texts, videos, terrorist autobiographies, declassified documents, and the like. This will produce better research, because scholars will not waste time collecting data from scratch for every new article. The second is for all authors to make the primary sources cited in their publications available online, either on personal websites or somewhere else (cf. Andrew Moravcsik's call for "Active Citation"). This will improve the quality of research by forcing authors to be more careful about the inferences they draw from primary sources. Today, people get away with biased interpretations because they know that nobody is going to check on them. The increased transparency will probably help improve the field's reputation by dispelling the doubts that outsiders often have about the authenticity of sources used in terrorism research.

These two recommendations may seem to be directed mainly at the reputation problem, but in my view they also address the relevance problem. First of all, by engaging the disciplines more, we will be better positioned to bring in new theories, methods or fresh perspectives than if we all just engage with the terrorism literature. This is something that I think practitioners will value, for I suspect they need new analytical tools and perspectives more than they need data. Second, by pooling primary sources, we will strengthen the

empirical foundation of our studies, thereby improving our credibility vis a vis the intel analysts who really know the micro.

There is no easy solution to the problems highlighted here. There is also no simple answer to what the role of academics should be in our overall counterterrorism efforts. There should of course be room for multiple roles, with some people going the purely academic route and others doing more applied work. But it is time to think seriously about where the field as a whole should go from here, and this conference is an excellent place to launch that debate.