



ETHICS AND DARK SIDE OF RESEARCHING TERRORISM

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Researching terrorism has never been an easy job. Terrorism can be defined as the premeditated use of or threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups to attain political or social objectives by intimidating large audiences beyond the circle of the immediate victims of terrorist acts.

The study of terrorism is usually classified into four categories: (1) why terrorism occurs, (2) how terrorism works, (3) what its social and political effects are, and (4) how to effectively counter it. This article goes beyond those major questions to highlight the risks and challenges faced by researchers in the field. It is important to distinguish myths from truths when conducting research on this controversial topic.

Difficulties, Challenges, and Impediments

Researching terrorism can be very risky. Admittedly, there are other risky areas of research including nuclear weapons, advanced weaponry including anti-ballistic missiles, radiation, biological hazards and other dangerous substances. Other equally dangerous fields are researches on drug cartels and the corruption of politicians. Despite that, research on terrorism entails its own set of risks.

There are many real risks that can exclusively be associated with researching terrorism. For example, a scholar critiquing Zionism might encounter dozens of problems; from the possibility of being assassinated by the Mossad, to the denial of promotion or funding for research, partly due to the strong lobbying from pro-Israeli lobbyists. This is unfortunate and counter-productive since the research might be constructive in nature, geared towards the good of everyone including Jews themselves.

Researchers focusing on terrorism in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region will also be blacklisted if their comments are perceived to be too critical or seem to be against the establishment. Genuine and constructive comments might be misinterpreted, and the consequences can be fatal.

The situation is not necessarily better in the western part of the world. Honest and critical comments unfavourable to Western governments combating terrorism can result in profiling, rejection of publications, and even blacklisting. For example, researchers will find that their criticism of the degrading approach adopted by France in its systemic association of Islam with terrorism can backfire.

There are numerous reasons why many researchers avoid conducting research on terrorism. The first one is the nature of the research issues. Some research issues, even published ones, might be of forbidden nature, prohibited, or dubious. They can be legal in one country and forbidden in another. They might be legal yesterday and illegal today. Possession of questionable research issues is always risky. In many countries, emergency or security laws prevail over the standard provisions in legislation governing events pertaining to terrorism. In simple words, charges related to terrorism will be hard to refute.

Problems of Legal Interpretation

Moreover, certain research issues might be legal, but exploring them might lead to suspicion, resulting in the profiling, investigation or arrest of the researcher. Due to lack of clear-cut regulations concerning research issues involving terrorism, there is a real risk that a genuine researcher might be implicated and prosecuted for criminal offense.

Despite the apparent huge amount of literature available on terrorism, a large chunk is second-hand material, unidirectional, biased, and unconvincing. One of the risky challenges in researching terrorism is the uncertainty surrounding the legal nature of the issue discussed. It is hard to possess, let alone publicize, and it differs in legality from one country to another. There are also real or perceived dangers associated with conflict zones, potential retaliation, and severe lack of statistical analysis and first-hand data.

Some publications are evidently illegal; e.g., a pamphlet promoting terrorists' propaganda which could be consulted by researchers from the police department, counter-terrorism units or the military to formulate a proper counter-terrorism policy. Due to the inadequacy of relevant legislature, researchers will remain liable for the possession of illegal subject-matter. Conducting empirical research that includes interviews with terrorists or suspects can also be dangerous. Terrorists and militant groups are wanted, and they are not waiting around to be interviewed. To get access to

them, they must be convinced that the interview is not a trap. Therefore, they will most likely be the ones setting up the location for the interview, only to change it at the last minute to ensure their safety. However, this will put the interviewer in a serious threat, and there is a real possibility that the interviewer might himself be kidnapped or killed.

Impartiality and Data Inadequacy

Another major challenge for researchers of terrorism is the sensitivity of this area of research. Ideally, the research must be impartial. However, Dolnik (2011) warns that given the highly emotional and subjective nature of the terrorism phenomenon, available data tend to be strongly politically manipulated, requiring a higher standard of verification and objectivity to ensure the reliability and accuracy of findings.

Beside severe lack of statistical analysis and even first-hand data, the situation is exacerbated by weak research methodology and problems with finding reliable media sources due to media bias and inaccuracy. There is therefore an over-reliance on useless open-source documents.

Another challenge that researchers must be aware of is the psychological risk. Arguing against the mainstream or the officially accepted version can be very risky, even devastating, for a researcher. It might result in rejection of the request for funding, being blacklisted or even arrested.

A researcher or interviewer conducting empirical research might be blacklisted or targeted, not only by terrorists or militant groups, but also by the government or other interested parties. His writings might be deemed too controversial and provocative, and this can lead to labelling him as sympathizer of terrorists or militant groups, while in reality, he has been merely writing an objective and balanced report.

Conclusion

The series of risks and challenges continues after the completion of the research on terrorism. In order to minimize the risks associated with researching terrorism, a researcher must ensure compliance with law and adherence to the ethical standards of research. More importantly, governments should ensure the existence of a proper legal framework regulating research on terrorism. In the end, a good research will be constructive and beneficial to everyone.