Efficacy of US Counter Terror Policies:

A Literature Review

Cameron Tyler Lallana
UC Davis
ctlallana@ucdavis.edu

The threat of terrorism looms large in the American imagination. Though the actual likelihood of being killed in a terrorist incident on U.S. soil is vanishingly small, terror at home and abroad has taken center place in American life.[1] Over the past two decades—especially post-9/11—the U.S. government has increasingly put the issue of terrorism at the feet of non-state actors, and come to utilize a toolset primarily comprised of military solutions. Two decades into the "War on Terror," it would be difficult to argue—16 years after *Mission Accomplished*, 18 years after the invasion Afghanistan, and in an era where soldiers may well be fighting in wars initiated before they were born—that US counter-terrorism policies have been successful. At this juncture, it would be prudent to collate academic analyses of discrete elements of the War on Terror in an attempt to tease apart exactly what is being done well, what is being done poorly, and how these elements might be improved. Broadly speaking, the literature herein reviewed can be broadly separated in five categories: (1) reviews of US military counter-insurgent (COIN) strategy; (2) attitudes toward American and its relation to policy efficacy; (3) evaluations of the effects of US Aid; (4) A review of American intelligence work; (5) the relationship between US partners and mutual counter-terror policies.

## COIN STRATEGY

In President Clinton's 2000 *National Security Strategy*, for example, the issue of counter-terrorism by non-state actors is not significantly addressed until page 28; even then, the authors argue for a counter-terror approach based in the transnational efforts of law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, supported by diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions. The right to

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[1] As noted by Nowrasteh in a post on the *Cato Institute*'s website, the odds of being killed by a foreign-born terrorist was 1 in 104.2 million; the odds of being killed by an animal, on the other hand, was 1 in 1.6 million (2018).

use military force is, of course, reserved at the discretion of the Executive, but this caveat is introduced in the fifth paragraph in this section (United States, 2000). Regardless of the reality of the Clinton Administration's actions, we can learn a great deal about a presidential administration's desired *optics* through their use of rhetoric. Compare this with President Trump's 2017 *National Security Strategy*: while the Clinton 2000 NSS utilizes non-specific language regarding terrorist groups, the Trump NSS specifically identifies "Jihadist terrorist organizations" as "the most dangerous terrorist threat to the nation;" the US, it says, is in a war against "these fanatics who advance a totalitarian vision for a global Islamist caliphate that justifies murder and slavery…and seeks to undermine the American way of life." The document goes on to emphasize the need for direct military engagement against terrorist groups, regardless of where they are (United States, 2017). The increased emphasis on military solutions is apparent in the rapid ballooning of yearly Department of Defense allocations—from $270 billion in 2000 to $685 billion in 2018 (US Department of Defense, 1999; US Department of Defense, 2018). Where a large chunk of this money has gone is hardly a mystery—invading two countries, toppling existing regimes, and spending years dealing with the consequences is hardly cheap—but even these seemingly unrelated expenditures can tie into the problem of counter-terrorism policies in their potential to induce new actors to join anti-American armed groups.

This is especially important in the context of Afghanistan, which provides—unfortunately—a unique case study of American COIN policies from the beginning of the War on Terror to the current day. There are many potential approaches to understanding this issue, but perhaps the most relevant to the topic at hand are two-fold: (a) the efficacy of military

strategy; and (b) the attitude of the civilian populace. In order to best understand this, it is important to first understand the inherent bias that discussions of COIN policy contains. As noted by Smith and Jones in *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*, counter-insurgency frames the entire discussion around the best way to counter such-and-such insurgency; it does not, however, "ask what counterinsurgency in fact counters" (2015, p.1). Once a group is defined as insurgent (such as the Taliban), in essence, it is quarantined and categorized separately from "legitimate" non-state armed groups (such as the Taliban during the Afghan-Soviet war) that should receive American support. Thus, an artifice of apoliticality is granted upon COIN. Once the 'why' is removed, the 'what' of military strategy seems comparatively doable. The problem here is that COIN, as an extension of Western military policy, remains a political action nonetheless. Smith and Jones point to the conditions for success in the US Military's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, which "[require] establishing legitimate government supported by the people and able to address the fundamental causes that insurgents use to gain support" (2015, p.57). This win condition is predicated on two assumptions. First, that insurgency is merely the result of bad governance; and secondly that good governance, usually in the form of American-style democracy, has the ability to rectify that shortcoming. In effect, it is a process of replicating American modernity onto another country. Therein lies the political difficulty: by maintaining the posture that counter-insurgency isn't political (and therefore subject to the winds of American political climate) and is actually a matter of "creating" effective governance, the US is unable to genuinely view the myriad political and cultural complexities of these situations. In this way, COIN prevents itself from being an effective strategy.

**Afghanistan: A Case Study**

This was long a problem in American military policy in Afghanistan, notes Taddeo, in a survey of evolution strategy in the region. In the early 2000s, the US military was able to overwhelm the Taliban's main resistance in under two months—but this was only a short-term victory. As the fighting dragged on, the "enemy-centric warfare drew attention to the enemy ignoring the population, the process of institution-building, infrastructures, and services for the local communities" (2010, p.29). Without an effective (or any, seemingly) post-conflict strategy, the Taliban was quickly able to re-emerge as an effective opposition force while American attempts to eliminate social support for the Taliban and create a centralized government initially floundered. Taddeo highlights the deeply negative effect of American airstrikes on Afghan public opinion—lack of communication with local groups often translated into collateral damage; although the Americans were certainly not the only inflicting civilian casualties, other research conducted in Afghanistan by Lyall, Blair, and Imai demonstrates that civilians show a much greater capacity to forgive violence undertaken by native actors (i.e. the Taliban) than by non-native actors (i.e. Coalition Forces) (2010, p.30; 2013). Additionally, in a more fine-grain survey of American strategy, Tankel notes that, before the US troops "lacked knowledge of the complex tribal dynamics and became unwitting enforcers for competing power brokers" as inexpert attempts to engage local power structures led to opportunists using US power to "settle scores, arrogate power, and enrich themselves" (2018, p.61). Although the US may not have been aware of how they were being used, Tankel argues that the local population was; and that they were especially angered when disinformation led to US raids that captured or killed Taliban

leaders who had already switched allegiance to the Afghan government (2018, p.61). It wasn't until 2003 that the American strategy began to shift away from this and geared up for greater face-to-face engagement with fewer airstrikes, more troops on the ground, greater use of experts on local culture, and greater engagement with local power structures (Taddeo, 2010, p.30). These tactics, too, would be drawn dawn in 2005 as the US sought to reduce their direct involvement.

The case study of Afghanistan provides a number of lessons for our purposes. First, the reality of blowback in US foreign policy. Groups—especially armed groups—who oppose the US aren't doing so because they hate American freedoms, but rather because they hold grievances against US power. These grievances may be more or less legitimate, but the reality is that—if a group is willing to organize and fight over them—these grievances are *real*. They can be compounded. There are few situations which are as ready a breeding ground for opposition powers as war zones. As has been pointed out by the above authors, inexpertise can result in the death of civilians and even on-side leaders—actions that can easily lose the support of the populace. One one level, losing this support fails a key victory condition in the US's own COIN win conditions; on another level, it has the potential for greatly increasing grievance against US power that may translate into greater military opposition. For lack of an army with the technical training and abilities to take on the US army toe-to-toe, guerilla tactics (including terrorist action) then become more likely. In the worst case scenario, we may see these tactics not only fail to improve the situation, but also fail to prevent it from becoming much worse. After over ten years of war in both Iraq and Afghanistan and countless raids and assassinations designed to lessen the power of non-state armed groups in the area, the Middle East is not only less stable

than pre-2001, we have also seen the emergence of new groups, such as ISIS/ISIL, that are more than able to assert power in the region.

**A Modern Military Korenizatsiya**

Across any number of American-involved conflicts, we often see the utilization of local irregular troops—armed groups drawn from the local populace that are trained and armed by the use, then used alongside, instead of, or to replace US troops. On paper, this is an extremely attractive option—it is cheaper, less-difficult than deploying a full combat force, and—theoretically—more sustainable. There is also evidence that local troops—who are more sensitive or familiar with the area's culture, social and political mores, and even who is for or against resistance groups—may be more effective than external troops. In a study of the Second Chechen war, Lyall finds that villages swept by Chechen irregulars had fewer subsequent terror attacks as compared to operations carried out by Russian troops (2010). Though the mechanisms by which this happens, Lyall admits, are yet unclear, use of irregulars certainly *may* be useful in the right context. The problem in the American context, Moran argues, is that US-backed irregulars have always had much less oversight and few-to-no mechanisms of accountability (2015). Disincentives against committing crimes, therefore, are greatly lessened, as we have seen in many of the groups supported by the US. This is especially true for irregular troops who have been intentionally recruited for their former positions in defeated militaries; for a particularly egregious example, Moran points to the "Wolf Brigade" in Iraq, which was composed of the late Saddam Hussein's Republican Guardsmen (2015, p. 163). From other research, we know that violence committed

against civilians by foreign troops (or militants associated with foreign groups) tends to have a negative and outsized relationship on the views of the affected populace.

**COIN Conclusion**

To round up, the most apparent lesson here is that American military intervention has historically undervalued the political element of COIN, which has undercut their ability to plan beyond enemy-elimination phases of invasion and prepare for the inevitable need for state-building. Furthermore, without understanding the local context, American state-building and democratization will always be fighting an uphill battle if it clashes with existing power structures. It is precisely this difficulty that leads some theorists such as Eland to argue that the US should almost never be involved in COIN operations. Without clear, comprehensive, specific, and realistic goals, Eland makes the case, that the US will always be caught in a quagmire; and seeing as this mission creep almost always seems to occur, it would be best for the US to avoid these operations altogether (2013). One of Eland's recommendations for doing so—paring down defense agreements—might be difficult as the US has a deep reliance on other states to help combat terrorist groups. Keeping that in mind, the question naturally occurs: are these relationships actually useful?

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**US Relationships**

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Although the US's difficulties with the Taliban has already been extensively covered earlier, the previous framing was incomplete (an inherent incompleteness in current COIN strategy, as Smith and Jones argued). No non-state actor exists in the vacuum of the conflict dyad. Even the

Taliban has its state supporters. In an article regarding US-Pakistani relations, Soherwordi outlines the complex relationship between the two state: although the two countries have long cooperated (to varying degrees, granted) and the US has seen Pakistan as an important ally in the Afghan conflict, the two countries do not have the same security objectives or even understanding of the situation (2010). For example, while the US has a entirely negative view of the Taliban, Pakistani perceptions take a more nuanced view, separating the "good Taliban of Afghanistan" from the "extremists, 'fundamentalists," [and] 'terrorists'" that operate in Pakistan's tribal areas (Soherwordi, 2013, p.61). Therefore, we find both parties have different desired outcomes to the situation, which can undercut attainment of US policy objectives. This divergence in security objectives can prevent problems from ever being solved.

For example, while reviewing US aid to states affected by terrorism, Boutton finds that recipients of aid which posses a state power rival tend to have conflicts with armed non-government groups that have greater duration than in recipient states without such a rival (2014). Additionally, receiving aid seems to have a positive impact on attacks on US-interests, but no effect on attacks on unaligned interest (Boutton, 2014). Also in 2014, Boutton and Carter carried out an analysis of trends in US foreign aid, finding that the greatest indicator of foreign aid allocations to a country is targeting of US-interests in those countries, regardless of ally-ship or polity. There are, of course, some nuances in this—regimes with poor human rights records were more likely to receive economic aid while allies were more likely to receive military aid—but the basic fact remains that targeting of US allies or even general terrorism do not provoke nearly the reaction that targeting US interests does. Taking the findings of both of these articles provides a clear picture of how US aid may fail to actually help its security objectives: a

state with a militant armed group that targets US interests may be incentivized to *not* deal a death blow to that group if foreign aid (which is being diverted to funding military opposition to a rival state power) is predicated on its existence. Take again the example of Pakistan, which does cooperate with the US to oppose Taliban power in its border regions with Afghanistan, and also has a rival state power in the form of India. Were the problem that the US is interested in—the Taliban—to be completely resolved, then there is a large chance that Pakistan will then lose funding from the US. This is not to say that any such nations would or are actively undercutting the US efforts, but only that that there are clear incentives to *have* a problem and *continue* having a problem in certain situations. In this situation, terrorist attacks would continue indefinitely.

### "Anti-American" Attitudes

Finally, we come to the murky waters of "perception." This is a large topic that deserves to be fully reviewed in its own right, but we will briefly touch upon relevant articles here.

Firstly, there is the potential real-world consequences of negative perceptions of America. In a theoretical discussion, Glaser identifies the issue of a perceived "lack of moral seriousness," which is found in the divide between US moral rhetoric and the reality of the US's War on Terrorism (2006, p.261). One acquired internationally, this reputation may undercut the potential gains of such an action. Even passively, such a reputation could lead to cynicism about US intentions in allies. In the realm of counter-terrorism specifically, Glaser points out that efforts to stem terror by democracy promotion could be undermined in the long run if people do not believe that the US is sincere or associate US efforts with their anti-democratic actions (2006, p.265). So attempts to stem terrorist activity by armed groups in US-involved combat

zone by the current method of democracy promotion (setting aside, momentarily, the efficacy of these strategies overall) can easily be undercut if local peoples understand the US in this light.

Finally, there is the matter of the American-to-world perspective. In an interview, Ahmad—much like Smith and Jones—argues that the use of the world "terrorist" reveals a fundamental disconnect between the American and "terrorist." The label of terrorist strips away any legitimacy of that group, blinding us to why these groups oppose US policy and action. Armed opposition to US power may seem like anti-Americanism, but Khurshid argues that these groups are motivated by much more personal concerns that don't have anything to do with US values or interests. Therefore, when we use terms like "anti-American" or "terrorist," we should be careful to make the effort to understand these groups in good faith. Without that understanding, American foreign policymakers will forever be banging their head against a wall, unable to comprehend why we hasn't already broken through to the other side.

## Conclusion

At the risk of being reductive, the most basic lesson to take away from the academic literature about modern American counter-terrorist policy is that we have not yet created plans or policies that have the potential to decisively end terrorism. Our modern, militarist policy can win as many military victories as it wants—without effective post-conflict strategies, insurgency will continue indefinitely. There is no easy answer to this difficulty. Theorists disagree over whether these shortcomings can be fixed (though they admit that this would require massive overhauls), while others entirely dismiss the notion is feasible at all, arguing that the US should instead chart a new course entirely.

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