Understanding how terrorist organizations learn from their mistakes and successes

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Carolin Görzig Credit: © MPI for Social Anthropology

Carolin Görzig has been setting up a Research Group at the Max Planck

Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle since August 2015. She is seeking to gain a better understanding of how terrorist organizations learn from their mistakes and successes, and how this influences their tactical, operational and strategic decisions. We spoke to her about the research project and the difficulty involved in establishing contact with terrorists.

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 there has been a lot of hype surrounding terrorism research. And yet we still know very little about how terrorists operate. Why is this the case in your opinion?

Görzig: Despite the current relevance of the research there is a lack of neutral and objective analyses. The topic is politically charged. Many states support terrorism research and try to influence the results in this way. Critics talk about 'embedded research', namely research that is designed on the basis of political requirements. Independent critical research like the work carried out here at the Max Planck Institute also exists, of course. Unfortunately, it is insufficient. There is still a lot we do not know, and we must learn to understand terrorists. This is the only way we can combat the causes of violence.

What are you planning to do with your research group?

We want to find out how terrorist organizations learn from their experience. So our analyses focus primarily on their tactical, operational and strategic approaches. How do individual organizations learn from their successes and failures? How do they compete with other terrorist groups and how do they react to anti-terrorist actions? What are the

impacts of state support and 'safe harbours'? These are just a few examples of the questions we are exploring.

Field research will be a key tool in our research. We would like to speak with terrorist dropouts and imprisoned terrorists in Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Israel, Ireland, France and the US, for example.

What kind of challenges do you face in doing this?

First of all, we have to gain access to the informants and ensure the safety of my colleagues. In addition, we face numerous ethical challenges regarding the use of the data we obtain. Informants often have expectations when they pass on information.

I can build on my experience in Turkey, Syria, Egypt and Colombia in relation to all of these points. We also work closely with non-governmental organizations which have very good local knowledge.

Statistics show that 60 percent of terrorist organizations do not exist for more than a year and only 10 percent exist for longer than 10 years. What makes terrorist organizations 'successful'?

Successful terrorist groups are flexible. As terrorism researcher Bruce Hoffman said in 2006: "The terrorist campaign is like a shark in the water: it must keep moving forward – no matter how slowly or incrementally – or die."

An example of this is the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. This group, which split from the organization Armed Islamic Group (GIA), was established in Algeria in 1998 under the name Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). It merged with Al-Qaeda in

September 2006 and has been expanding its operations in North and West Africa since then.

The merger with Al-Qaeda resulted in temporary changes in its tactics: the terrorists committed more suicide attacks in the early days. State military interventions also prompted strategic changes within the organization and it transferred its actions from Algeria to northern Mali. It also exploits the unstable situation in Libya to attack neighbouring states.

You are the author of the book Talking to Terrorists. What are the conditions necessary for negotiating with terrorists?

The doctrine of not negotiating with terrorists is based on the assumption that negotiation further fuels the spiral of violence. It sends a signal to other terrorist groups indicating that violence pays off when it comes to achieving their aims.

The latest research is moving away from certain aspects of this view. The question is no longer whether we should negotiate with terrorists, but what is the best way to negotiate with them. Instead of rewarding violence, we should aim to reward the withdrawal from terrorism. Such negotiations, which usually involve a combination of direct, unofficial and official discussions, need a lot of time, often decades. Government representatives are rarely in office long enough to advance such processes in the long term.

Will your latest research be incorporated into consultation with politicians?

Consultation with politicians is definitely desirable for us.

More information: Carolin Goerzig, Khaled Al-Hashimi. Radicalization in Western Europe: Integration and loss of Identity among Muslim Communities. Routledge, 2014

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