



## THE INTERSECTIONS OF TERRORISM AND CIVIL WAR

**Date: May 16, 2024**

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### KEY EVENTS

On May 16, 2024, Dr. Michael Soules, Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science from the University of Houston, presented *The Intersections of Terrorism and Civil War*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the intersection of terrorism and civil war, the definition of terrorism and the empirical implications, the relationship between group strength and utilisation of terrorism, the effectiveness of terrorism, and the contested literature on terrorism and civil war.

### NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Soules spoke on the intersection of terrorism and civil war, noting that these two phenomena should be studied together and highlighting the effectiveness of terrorism in achieving rebel groups' goals. Dr. Soules also discussed rebel recruitment strategies, referencing findings that suggest rebel groups vary significantly in how they recruit members, and the strategies they employ impact the type of recruits they receive and may impact the group's overall behaviour. Dr. Soules noted that there are empirical consequences for how terrorism is defined, discussing the relationship between group strength and terrorism, indicating that the former may relate to the utilisation of the latter. Dr. Soules attributed contested literature as likely being caused by the varying research methods and conceptualizations employed between scholars and recommends that future research emphasise conditional relationships and focus on unpacking the mechanics of terrorism.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Dr. Soules stated that, historically, scholars have studied terrorism and civil war as two separate phenomena; however, he argued that these two phenomena intersect in many important ways, with terrorism often being a prelude to civil war. It acts as the conduct of the conflicts, in addition to being a significant part of post-civil war society. Academic research has begun to examine the intersection of civil war and terrorism and Dr. Soules noted that this area of study is relevant to today's world, as terrorism plays a prominent role in civil wars. It is therefore important that this topic is understood both from an academic perspective as well as from a policy standpoint.

Dr. Soules provided an overview of the definition of terrorism, arguing that there has been a decades-long debate over what terrorism is without a definitive answer. He stated that there are empirical consequences for how terrorism is defined, and that the way in which it is defined impacts the results of the research. Therefore, it is essential to consider how the lack of consensus on the definition of terrorism impacts terrorism research. Dr. Soules suggested that there are significant biases in how terrorism is defined in research, the media, and how the public perceives the phenomenon.

Dr. Soules described terrorism as threats of violence or the use of violence to achieve political or social gain, with far-reaching psychological repercussions that extend beyond the immediate victim or target of the attack. This is additionally referred to as propaganda by deed. Moreover, terrorism is generally considered to involve violence perpetrated by non-state actors; however, there are instances where state-actors can also be the perpetrators of terrorism. Lastly, terrorism generally involves violence against civilians or non-combatants.

Dr. Soules defined civil war as armed conflicts occurring within countries, between two or more parties (with one representing the government), and an aim to take over the state or change policy. There must be effective resistance among all actors as well as a minimal threshold for violence; specifically, there must be a certain level of severity for the conflict to be defined as a civil war. This severity is measured based on the number of battle-related deaths.

Drawing upon the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the number of civil wars far outweighs the number of international conflicts, posing significant

implications for national security and policy. Citing a study on the spatial and temporal dimensions of civil war, Dr. Soules highlighted that there is a significant spatial and temporal overlap between terror events within civil war and conflict zones.

Dr. Soules proposed that terrorism is a weapon utilised by weaker entities that are incapable of directly confronting the state in conventional military battles. This tactic sends a signal to civilians that their government is unable or incapable of protecting them, which may lead to civilians turning against their government, therefore increasing pressure on the state to make concessions to the terrorists to end hostilities. Weak groups can also utilise terrorism to signal their strength and resolve in light of their perceived weak material state. This notion is an area of academic division. There is literature suggesting that weaker groups commit more terrorism and that stronger groups are more likely to respond to government repression with terrorism. However, other findings do not indicate significant relationships between group strength and use of terrorism.

Dr. Soules discussed rebel recruitment tactics as they relate to terrorism, arguing that rebel groups vary significantly in their recruitment strategies, utilising ideological appeals, material incentives, and social networks. The type of tactics used to recruit rebels influences the type of recruit that joins, which therefore affects the rebel group's behaviour. Dr. Soules highlighted a divide in scholarly research, indicating that groups with long-term ideological goals may be less likely to use terrorism to avoid reputational harm; however, this may not be the case for groups following extreme ideologies such as religious fundamentalist or ethnonationalist groups which strongly distinguish between in-group and out-group.

Dr. Soules examined whether terrorism is an effective strategy for rebel groups to achieve their goals, noting that it may compel civilians to support groups out of fear, or to rally around groups in reaction to government repression that is in response to terrorist acts. In contrast, he stated that terrorism may be ineffective in many cases, as it can reduce a government's willingness to negotiate with groups perceived as ideologically radical, therefore sparking civilian backlash or increasing support for the government. It may also lead to increased counterterrorism response. Literature on the topic is contested, with some scholars finding that rebel groups that use terrorism are more likely to be defeated, whereas others suggest that terrorism may increase chances of success. Moreover, groups that cause moderate casualties may be more likely to achieve success. It is important to note that definitions of success are subjective.

In addressing the contested literature, Dr. Soules argued that this could be attributed to differences in sampling, differences in conceptualizations and measurements of terrorism, and differences in the measurement of other key variables which may vary between scholars. Dr. Soules concluded by highlighting the need to provide more consideration into conditional relationships, to increasingly dive deeper and unpack the mechanics of terrorism and civil war, and to continue studying the two phenomena together.

### **Question & Answer Period**

*Civil war is kinetic violence. Could a civil war occur whereby the power of state leaders is useless against an ideological decay? (i.e. "I don't have to kill you. I just have to make you powerless to stop me" or "hearts and minds").*

Rebel groups employ a variety of "hearts and minds" approaches such as engaging in rebel governance or social services to win over the civilian population, proving that they may be superior ideologically to the government. Governments can also engage in these campaigns to combat terrorism; research indicates that this can be an effective counter-terrorism strategy. There is some evidence that this strategy has worked in certain cities and municipalities in Iraq. One can also look at the social services that Hezbollah provides and how that may relate to civilian support.

*The terms "transnational terrorism" and "civil war" seem to be mutually exclusive. Given the ideological nature of terrorism and the 'civil' aspect of civil war, doesn't this imply boundaries of state? Would there be another way to view the phenomenon outside of the sometimes-foggy definition of terrorism?*

Cross border violence plays an important role in civil war. According research, weaker rebel groups are more likely to cross borders and use terrorism in response to weakness. One can look at groups in Angola and ISIS; when ISIS controlled more territory, a higher percentage of its violence took place in Iraq and Syria, but the percentage that took place abroad increased as they lost territory.

*What are the success milestones of precursors to civil war?*

Some countries are less likely to encounter civil wars and violence, particularly when the state is more accommodating of minority groups. For example, lower levels of gender violence may correlate with lower chances for the outbreak of

civil war. Where there exist more egalitarian societies wherein women are in positions of political influence, we may see more peaceful approaches to conflict resolution. Additionally, societies with higher levels of gender equality may be socialized more towards peaceful dispositions. In contrast, countries with higher levels of discrimination that exclude ethnic or minority groups from political power are most likely to experience civil wars.

*How much does the increase of diversity of actors in civil wars have to do with the purpose and inner mechanics of the Geneva convention to limit conventional peer-to-peer conflict?*

International norms and laws have disincentivized international conflict, but those changes did not resolve domestic political disputes. For instance, after World War Two, the international community may have been more capable of stopping the onset of international conflict. However, the factors involved in international conflicts are different than those of civil wars, meaning that the ability of the international community to prevent the onset of international conflicts did not apply to civil wars.

*What is the future evolution of civil war moving into the current global security climate?*

Conflicts may be becoming more transnational, and there is a rise in more radical religious groups which may relate to the increased capacity to leverage international networks and resources.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Historically, terrorism and civil wars have been studied separately; however, these two phenomena often intersect in many important ways. Therefore, it is important that these phenomena are studied together.
- There are empirical consequences for how terrorism is defined, given that the way in which it is defined impacts the results of the research. Therefore, it is essential to consider how the lack of consensus on the definition of terrorism impacts terrorism research.
- Whether there is a relationship between group strength and the utilization of terrorism is an area of academic division. Some studies indicate that weaker groups are most likely to use terrorism, while other studies indicate that stronger groups will employ terrorism in response to repressive governments. Alternatively, other studies find no significant relationship between the two.

- Rebel groups vary significantly in their recruitment strategies, affecting the types of recruits they receive and therefore the rebel group's overall behavior.
- Research suggests that terrorism may be an effective strategy for rebel groups in achieving their goals. However, other studies indicate that the utilization of terrorism may negatively impact rebel groups' chances of success. This is an area of scholarly debate.
- Contested literature could be attributed to differences in sampling, differences in conceptualizations and measurements of terrorism, and differences in the measurement of other key variables which may vary between scholars. Further emphasis should be placed on conditional relationships and unpacking the mechanics of terrorism.

### FURTHER READING

Piazza, J. A., & Soules, M. J. (2021). Terror after the Caliphate: The effect of ISIS loss of control over population centers on patterns of global terrorism. *Security Studies*, 1-29.

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Soules, M. J. (2023). Recruiting rebels: Introducing the rebel appeals and incentives dataset. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1-27.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231154813>

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