RESEARCH INTO POLITICAL UNREST FOR INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES, GOVERNMENTS, COMPANIES AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS

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Nowadays most armed conflicts take place within rather than between states, with armed groups challenging the authority of the incumbent regime or the legality of the state. To gain insight into the origins and prospects of civil wars and insurgencies is therefore the most important task of presentday risk analysis.
How can we foresee how serious, how horrific a conflict can become? And how risky can such a conflict become for citizens, tourists, expatriates, investors, observers, or soldiers of peacekeeping missions and interventions? Without thorough risk analysis no one can spot an impending conflict, warn a government, agency, company or aid organization of this, or prevent a conflict from escalating, let alone solve it. Otherwise concepts like Early Warning, Early Response, Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution remain hollow phrases.

 Conflict analyses appear in all sorts of forms and shapes, dependent on the specific aims and methodologies of the researchers - and on the preferences of the academic, governmental or commercial sponsors. Thus the only things that country reports, for instance, have in common is that they describe the developments over one year, and that they contain recommendations on how to prevent, curtail or solve the conflict in question. Apart from such similarities the research set-up is often shaped by arrangements made between the analyst and the sponsor. Thus my country reports for the Dutch Ministry of Defence described the internal developments in the year 1998, with the following structure:

1. Background of Conflict
2. Recent Conflict
3. Conflict Management Attempts
4. Prognosis and Future Developments

The shortcomings of current conflict analyses
An alarming number of so-called 'experts' within and outside the academic world overgeneralize, oversimplify, and take easy shortcuts when analyzing armed conflicts. Yet they are not the only ones to blame for these shortcomings. Cutbacks and consequent reductions in qualified personnel and facilities at universities in the Netherlands and elsewhere force academics to conduct superficial, hasty and ill-constructed research. All too often their employers and sponsors demand full answers on profound questions

within a short space of time on a low budget. The most frequent errors made by conflict researchers are:

- Superficial, negligent or faulty selection and use of sources.
- Superficial, hazy or ill-conceived definitions and applications of concepts, classifications, hypotheses and theories.
- Superficial, careless or wrong interpretations of data, even if the correct sources are consulted/used and the correct analytical approaches/methods are applied.

Somewhat surprisingly, most conflict studies are purely descriptive, i.e describe events without explaining their occurrence through concepts, hypotheses and/or theories. For these studies nothing is as vital as access to good, trustworthy sources by which one becomes able to discern immediately the essential from the peripheral. In short, it all comes down to a lucid and compact representation of reliable information, ideally of undeniable facts.

Information is only reliable if it is confirmed by at least two separate sources independent from each other (thus beware that the information from source B is no secondhand derivative from source A or vice versa!). Preferably these sources must be primary, i.e. based on direct observations in the field from witnesses, observers, journalists, or from the researcher him- or herself. We cannot determine the prospects of future conflicts or the risks of current conflicts merely with information from the second or third hand. We must study the primary data, as interpretations from secondary or tertiary sources (thus from other researchers) are all too often biased or faulty. For good measure one ought to study these sources as well, of course, if only to compare them with one's own interpretations of events. In short, good conflict studies are the fruits of hard, painstaking, work for the sake of accuracy, while remaining continuously vigilant/on guard against propaganda and sensationalism hidden in the material.

Sadly, numerous conflict analysts rely on official information from authoritarian and totalitarian states, without further scrutiny or comparison with information from human rights organisations, local NGOs or other independent agencies. Thus a certain expert employed by the UN for the confidential research project Links between Drugs, Terrorism and Armed Conflict in Kosovo gathered information about the UÇK primarily in Belgrade, from the Yugoslav and Serb ministries of Foreign Affairs during the twilight days of the Milosevic regime. He uncritically accepted this information which naturally portrayed (and vilified) the UÇK as a purely terrorist and criminal organisation as being valid, without ever verifying this with independent sources.

The importance of clear concepts and research methods in conflict studies
Another widespread weakness in conflict studies is the futile enterprise of trying to answer vague research questions with obscure, assumed and/or unspoken concepts, classifications and methodologies. This is especially true in analyses on the nature and behaviour of rebels, particularly on the question whether they are freedom fighters, criminals or terrorists. One must investigate the origins, background, ideology, structure

and behaviour (way of fighting) of young, new rebels in order to determine the probabilities of them degenerating into criminals or terrorists; and to understand why old, veteran rebels become so base and brutal. One of the most notorious and indeed archetypal examples is the degeneration of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) from an idealistic Marxist rebel movement into a criminal gang specialised in kidnappings and the drugs trade. According to most conflict experts most rebel movements have criminalized and brutalized over the last few decades or are in the process of becoming so.

Vague and mutually contradictory definitions often lead to generalizations and simplifications like as "all armed non-state actors are or will become terrorists and bandits". If widely broadcast such premature, biased or downright wrong judgments on a newly established rebel group in, say, a developing country, typically cause foreign investments in that country to dry up quickly. Above all Western companies fear, apart from chaos and violence, kidnappings, extortions, sabotage and the like against their personnel or properties. However, staying too long in an unstable country is only one of the risks. One may also needlessly depart or stay away due to unfounded rumors or misplaced accusations against a certain rebel movement.
Already in 1978 conflict specialist J. Bowyer Bell pointed out that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Like love, terrorism is easy to recognize but difficult to define". Thus Bell indicated two key problems of this concept: it is politically sensitive, and it (consequently) is difficult to circumscribe. The best approach is not to define terrorists by what they believe or want (ideology) but by what they do (behaviour). John Horgan:

"we must get rid of all the political rhetoric and see terrorism in its true form: as a criminal method to express a political, religious or other belief. … By narrowing the definition [of terrorism] we will be better able to combat it effectively. By defining terrorism as a method one is able to bypass the fruitless discussion about the morality or legitimacy [of any terrorist act] and thereby reach more international consensus [on what constitutes terrorism]" (NRC Handelsblad 17/10/2001, p.5, translated from Dutch).
Only I find Morgan's definition not precise enough. In my UN report and in my preliminary PhD thesis (see my background/credentials at the end of this article) I have defined terrorism as "indiscriminate violence for whatever purpose against randomly chosen (groups of) unarmed and thereby defenceless civilians, unarmed off-duty soldiers, policemen and other defenceless combatants".

I speak of violence against unarmed and thereby defenceless people, not of "innocent civilians". Concepts of 'innocence' and 'guilt' are and subjective. Terrorism is violence against defenceless, random and unsuspecting victims. Throwing a handgrenade into a randomly chosen pub is a terrorist act. The victims in this pub may perhaps belong to an ethnic, religious or political group abhorred by the perpetrator(s), but the former were not individually targeted by the latter; they just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Arresting a selected group of civilians earmarked for en masse execution lateron is a crime, a 'violation of human rights', but strictly speaking no act of terrorism: the victims are not being randomly targeted in this case. In short, terrorism is a surprise

attack against unarmed people. The strikes with hijacked airplanes in Washington DC and New York on 11 September 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people, are therefore terrorist ones. Bombings announced beforehand I actually do not regard as real manifestations of terrorism, as the authorities are given the opportunity to warn, evacuate and thereby protect its citizens. Without the elements 'random' or 'indiscriminate' and 'surprise' or 'without warning' encapsulated/contained in the definition, terrorism cannot be distinguished from other forms of violence.

Murky definitions of 'terrorism', 'genocide', 'ethnic cleansing', etc. blur the distinctions of kind and gravity of crime these concepts ought to indicate. Obfuscated concepts lead to confused and misplaced judgments. Thus some ethnic Albanians in Macedonia call their continuing discrimination by ethnic Macedonians a form of 'genocide'. Have you ever heard of thousands, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of Albanians being murdered in Macedonia? Discrimination is less grave than repression, and the latter one is not nearly as horrific as genocide, however one defines them. The Macedonian Albanians are discriminated against as second class citizens, and are frequently abused/maltreated by the Macedonian police. Yet they are not brutally suppressed as the Kosovar Albanians were under the Milosevic regime.

Just like 'terrorism' most or all warring parties misuse the term 'genocide' as a derogatory 'container concept', a negative yet empty label for propaganda purposes. In an article on Kosovo drs. Berto Jongman distinguishes 'genocide' from other forms of mass murder like (during) 'ethnic cleansing':

"Ethnic cleansing is focused on the 'cleaning', the 'purification' of a territory from an ethnic group through terror, rape and murder. Genocide is focused on the annihilation of such a group whereby the borders are closed to prevent escape. This does not imply/mean to say that ethnic cleansing is less barbarous [than genocide] and should not be persecuted as a Crime against Humanity. Also genocide falls within the generic concept of Crimes against Humanity" (Nieuw Tijdschrift, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Jrg. 12 No.3, 1999, p.60, translated from Dutch).

Extremists abandon any restraint or nuance when describing their enemy. Thus in the summer of 2001a spokesman of a Macedonian paramilitary group said that practically all Albanians were guilty of 'extremism', 'terrorism' and 'genocide' against the Macedonian people. The number of civilian casualties among the ethnic Macedonians during the fighting that year were hardly more than a dozen.

Nonetheless many ethnic Macedonians brand the rebels of the Albanian Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombetare*, UÇK) as 'terrorists', simply because they are a) livid about the uprising while the Albanians 'had it so good', b) incensed about the 'illegality' of this rebellion against the state, and c) worried about the alleged primary aim of the UÇK: the creation of a Greater Albania. The Serbs have for the same reasons stigmatised the Liberation Army of Kosova (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK) as a 'terrorist' organization.

However, the Macedonian UÇK did, with a few exceptions, kill only armed members of the Macedonian policy through ambushes and other (surprise) attacks. Naturally these soldiers and policemen were during those attacks in the practical sense nearly as defenceless as unarmed civilians. This is especially true when snipers shoot them or commando's cut their throats. Yet such fighting techniques have been permitted by international war conventions for centuries if used against combatants only. Rebels may be illegal or even illegitimate fighters of an unrecognised party, but it would be absurd to deny them the right to 'attack by stealth' in a civil war or any other conflict. In the moral sense there is and should be no distinction between the rebel who kills a soldier in an ambush and the soldier who kills a rebel in an ambush.

Nonetheless, NATO's Secretary-General George Robertson, the American Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other Western leaders prematurely derided the UÇK-fighters in Macedonia as "terrorists" and "bandits" in the spring of 2001, without investigating the allegations, let alone coming up with sufficient evidence of actual atrocities. These condemnations were hastily withdrawn soon after the interim peace accord and the partial disarmament of the UÇK by NATO. Yet even this changed attitude towards the UÇK derives from the wish to keep Macedonia stable rather than from any new insight about this rebel movement.

Apart from the dangers from armed non-state actors, we must gain more general insights into the risks posed by national and regional conflicts, so as to better predict the prospects of escalation or de-escalation. Hasty or ill-conceived questions, concepts and typologies lead to wrong/faulty interpretations and conclusions. Unfortunately, even a correct analytical approach - with good definitions of war, rebellion, terrorism, genocide - is no guarantee for correct interpretations of the data. We may apply excellent concepts in the wrong way - or we may simply not dig far enough.

For instance, a researcher may be mistaken if he classifies a bomb blast in a randomly chosen pub as a typical case of terrorism. The perpetrators may have opted for the specific method (bombing) to mask their real aim: the killing of particular individuals regularly frequenting the pub. In their eyes other fatalities are peripheral/incidental, though useful in confusing the authorities (and analysts). This is assassination, which I define as "lethal violence for whatever purpose against carefully selected individuals, possibly unarmed or unprotected - such as prominent politicians, military or civilians" (though the 'incidental' fatalities in the hypothetical case may be so numerous that it may be considered a terrorist act or a terrorist-assassination amalgam).

Possible targets of the assassin are leaders who are well-protected by bodyguards and armor; think of the unsuccessful hits against Hitler! For this reason terrorism is generally regarded as far more reprehensible than assassination, as the victims in the former case are without exception randomly targeted, unprepared and thereby utterly defenceless.

The errors, pitfalls and obstacles described above ought to be self-evident for every researcher. It seems as if conflict studies and risk analyses suffer more from these shortcomings than other disciplines; this is partially due to the political sensitivity of these studies, and partially due to the lack of definitional consensus regarding phenomena

like terrorism en genocide. Data are all too often contaminated with propaganda. With intuition, common sense and rigorous skepticism we can quickly divide most chaff from the wheat; sadly this is not done too often. Therefore, the following maxims are so obvious and yet at the same time so crucial:

- Be objective: formulate transparently and lucidly all research questions, hypotheses and concepts, and consistently apply or test them with all the gathered facts.
- Be thorough and persistent: delve as far as possible in the material within the available time. The less time the project has, the more modest the aims and methods must be.
- Be skeptical: use as many independent sources as possible, and remain ever vigilant against propagandistic motives from certain official and other partisan sources.

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