Background

The IGCC conference Terrorist Organizations: Social Science Research on Terrorism drew together academics and practitioners to discuss current research relevant to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. Leading social scientists from political science, economics, sociology, and anthropology and practitioners from the U.S. military, the U.S. State Department, and the British Foreign Service presented their latest findings and on-the-ground experiences during two days of meetings.

Participants came from the U.S. Special Operations Command, the British Embassy, Stanford, Harvard, UC Berkeley, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Queen’s University in Belfast, the University of Georgia, UC Irvine, UCLA, UC Davis, UC San Diego, San Diego State University, the Center for Combating Terrorism at West Point, the Rand Corporation, Livermore National Laboratories, the US Institute for Peace, the Naval Postgraduate School and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Policy Implications

In spite of the so-called "global war on terror," four radical religious organizations continue to surprise established militaries with their resilience and effectiveness at coordinated violence: Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army. A close examination of these groups reveals common elements in their evolution and frames a puzzle common to all four organizations: Why are religious radical groups, which often start out looking like benign, charitable organizations, so effective at violence?

A growing body of research in economics and sociology indicates that these violent organizations develop relationships of trust by providing benign services such as health and education through mutual aid long before they turn to violence. This conjecture has been dubbed "services for loyalty." A potent strategy for undermining the lethal potential of these organizations and others like them is by competing with them in providing benign social services. While a reconstruction strategy is part of the new U.S. view of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, the "services for loyalty" approach provides specific recommendations about which types of reconstruction and political development are critical: those that compete directly with the services provided by the benign wings of these violent Islamist organizations.

Organizers are pursuing funding for a series of follow-on activities, including a project on terrorists and rebels, a follow-up conference focused on policy and a training program in evaluating benign interventions for Special Operations forces.