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Overcoming Area Studies' Policy-Relevant Research Problem: The Case of the Sahel

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Abstract

Despite seven years of external military interventions to counter violent extremism, the security situation in the Sahel continues to deteriorate. Hard military approaches predominate in the region despite widespread recognition amongst Sahel specialists that the militarisation of the Sahel may actually be getting in the way of the search for a long-term political solution. This raises a number of questions that are important for Area Studies specialists: what type of information is brought into policymaking? Who produces it? How is it processed and what influence does it have? How does, or should, Area Studies fit within that? This research note argues that analysis undertaken by area specialists is indispensable in order to understand the complex nature of the various interlocking armed conflicts in the western Sahel. It suggests however that the type of thick description that characterises much area studies analysis can sometimes be too dense and too specific to be of immediate use to policymakers. Drawing on insights from Comparative Area Studies (intra-regional and cross-regional comparison in particular), it explores how Area Studies could contribute more effectively to policy relevant research on the Sahel.

As a field of scholarly enquiry, Area Studies faces a challenge when engaging with policymakers. While area specialists employ analytical and (often)-linguistic skills honed over years to produce deep, highly contextualised and locally-nuanced analysis of given geographical areas, policy makers, lacking in time

and needing to make decisions quickly, often require broad findings and actionable conclusions from research. Furthermore, officials will often desire policy solutions that can be applied across a range of contexts, perhaps being tasked with developing policy for regional or even global application covering multiple areas of analysis. This requires the analysis of themes across a *spread of different geographical areas*—not an activity normally conducted by area specialists who by definition focus ordinarily on one area. The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for example, has a newly created Sahel Department, tasked with tackling the security crisis across the Western Sahel region in the face of a transnational jihadist threat that crosses state borders and mutates between locations. While policy makers must, of course, be attentive to local and national differences, jihadism in the Sahel is not strictly speaking a national or purely locally-defined problem Indeed, despite the local roots of much 'jihadist' activity, it is a regional problem and Area Studies findings that only apply to specific locations may appear less relevant than ones with (or perceived to have) broader applicability.

All this may contribute to a perception that Area Studies is at a disadvantage vis-a-vis, or even less useful than, other disciplines, notably economics and political science (and sub-fields thereof such as Terrorism Studies or Civil War Studies), whose analyses are often more nomothetic and whose findings are more readily packaged for policy. At the same time, Area Studies—and more broadly the rich, deeply embedded and locally-derived knowledge of the type Area Studies specialists produce—is highly valued by policy makers. Indeed, government departments have individuals, such as the FCDO's Research Analysts or country-focused Intelligence Analysts in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), whose job it is to develop this form of expertise. Likewise, one of the key means of testing and critiquing the validity and usefulness of nomothetic and broader policy findings, is to assess them in the light of deep area specialist knowledge. Indeed, many scholars in International Relations or Political Science will rely heavily on Area Studies expertise both to familiarise

themselves with cases they are working on and as a form of data. Even some of the most highly used quantitative datasets (such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, or ACLED) rely on local newspaper sources which require area-based understanding of conflicts to be reliably turned into database entries. The robustness of analyses using this data relies on an understanding of its quality—a question often only area specialists can answer. Thus, herein lies a paradox: Area Studies research may not be the most readily accessible or immediately transferable to busy policy makers, yet it remains, ultimately, very important for good policy.

The question therefore is less 'is Area Studies useful for policy makers?' but rather 'how can Area Studies research be made more useful for policy makers?' The purpose of this research note is to explore the latter question through the prism of the current crisis in the wider Sahel region. The choice to explore this issue in the case of the Sahel is especially pertinent in the current context. First, it is important because, after nearly a decade of external military interventions in the region, the security situation is getting worse: the number of deaths resulting from violence has increased, the territorial spaces affected have expanded beyond their original epicentres in northern Mali and north-east Nigeria into neighbouring regions and countries, and increasing numbers of people have been displaced by the violence. There is a clear need for a different approach from policy makers; area specialists could and should have a key role in helping policy makers to develop a more conflict-sensitive approach.[1] Second, given the recent "pivot to the Sahel" (UK Gov, 2019) in UK foreign policy and the country's relative lack of expertise and experience in the region, there is an urgent need to support the expert knowledge already developed within UK policy making circles and further develop the kind of in-depth knowledge of the complex conflict

[1] "A conflict sensitive approach involves gaining a sound understanding of the two-way interaction activities and context and acting to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts of intervention on conflict, within an organisation's given priorities/objectives (mandate)" (CSC-Hub, 2020).

dynamics and governance issues facing the region that area specialists are best-placed to deliver.

Against this background, there is a clear need for the kind of thick description that is essential to our understanding of developments in the region and that is a key feature of Area Studies scholarship. Yet, as we will show, this kind of knowledge is often too dense, too specific and too localised to be of immediate use to policy makers. We therefore explore how Area Studies scholarship can overcome this obstacle and position itself to make an effective contribution to informing the decisions of policy makers. In particular, it argues for the importance of regionally based approaches to Area Studies scholarship—supporting, in this case, Sil and Ahram's (2020) call for intra-regional and cross-regional Comparative Area Studies (CAS). Finally, in order to open a debate about how such an approach might be applied, this paper offers some tentative suggestions of how this could be done in practice, both in the wider Sahel and beyond.

The Indispensable Challenge of Policy-Relevant Area Studies Knowledge

There are two dimensions to the problem of providing policy-relevant Area Studies knowledge to policy makers: first, (how) can we produce quality Area Studies-based research faster? Second, how to overcome the frequently assumed incompatibility of Area Studies and policy? In other words, can we find new ways of doing Area Studies research and present it in different ways, in order to make it more 'usable' by policymakers so that is not simply treated as 'useful background knowledge'?

To some extent, the problem of producing research faster is one that confronts academic researchers across the social sciences—especially those engaged in qualitative research. In this sense, the situation facing Area Studies researchers is not fundamentally different from that facing other social science researchers: in crisis situations policy makers typically need to make decisions in a matter of days,

occasionally weeks, but rarely longer. A crisis erupts or a serious problem emerges and the government needs to develop a policy response to address it. Academics, on the other hand, receive funding for research projects that may last up to five years, sometimes longer, which means that, taking into account the time needed to develop a research proposal, to be awarded the funding, to complete the research and publish the findings, the timeline can be seven years or more. The time problem is even more acute for Area Studies, where learning one or more foreign languages is a requirement for deepening the understanding of less familiar (to us) societies and developing appropriate frameworks for tracking complex political, social and economic transformations. If funding has not been available for learning the relevant languages and undertaking research in these areas, there are no 'quick fixes' in terms of Area Studies research that will fill this lacuna.

The second problem confronting Area Studies scholarship—finding new ways of doing Area Studies research and presenting it in such a way as to make it more usable by policymakers—is in fact potentially easier to address. Francis Fukuyama argued in 2003 that the "context-specific, culture bound and non-generalisable" is most useful for policy and would help us predict the behaviour of political actors, friendly and hostile, in the broader world (Hannerz, 2016). Yet, during the past two decades, the production of knowledge has seen a great push for big quantitative data and complex mathematical analyses, leaving Area Studies research facing a new challenge and the possibility of becoming marginalised if it fails to demonstrate its broader utility. At the academic level, Rudra Sil (2020) argues that additional to decreasing interest and resources following the end of the Cold War, Area Studies specialists have to balance and manage the expectations of both disciplinary and Area Studies audiences. The former prefers the prioritisation of methodological rigour by examining a representative sample of cases and drawing broader conclusions, renouncing—or at least relegating the importance of—the expert, deep knowledge that Area Studies provides. As a result, Area Studies scholarship is at a crisis point and faces an existing

but increasingly diminishing state of Area Studies as islands unto themselves (Clowes & Bromberg, 2016, p. 268).

If this problem is to be addressed, Area Studies specialists need to demonstrate the value of their research to policymakers by developing a new set of criteria on how knowledge can have the highest impact. Active actors in knowledge production, policy makers' requests fall predominantly in the problem-solving category, in which broader theories tend to dominate over the highly contextual in-depth, empirical, but mostly atheoretical studies that Area Studies scholarship produces. In this context positivist approaches that focus on easily measured performance variables in order to test a hypothesis and present plausible and actionable recommendations are preferred. Such approaches enable the division of a whole problem or set of problems into sub-components that can be individually addressed in a fast-paced environment. However, making fast, politically sensitive decisions on policy dilemmas often brings with it challenges in the use of knowledge and evidence to support their decisions. Waldman's (2014) research on the use of state-building research in fragile contexts, such as Afghanistan, Nepal and Sierra Leone, reveals that British policy making organisations are not monoliths, but complex systems with internal pressures and divergent preferences. Across government departments different attitudes exist towards the use of research. For example, while the former Department for International Development (DfID) had until the recent merger a strong budget, institutional culture and incentives for problem-based research engagement, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had a significantly smaller budget and a preference for political intelligence and operational information on key actors, while the MoD has a preference for tactical and 'solution-based' information. There are also worrying practices and deficiencies. Time available, role requirements and funding attached to the 'label of the day' affect demand-driven factors, which can encourage evidence 'cut and paste' and insertion of widely used terms and concepts to increase chances of approval.

So how can Area Studies scholarship insert itself into this complex and, on the face of it, rather unpromising environment? First, we need to recognise that policy makers are well aware that grand theorising on the one hand, and the fragmentation of knowledge on the other, pose acute challenges to the policy making world. They also know that their ability to draw together insights from the multiple disciplines feeding into decision making, ranging from macroeconomic modelling to specific regional, national and subnational political contexts, is limited by the way they are set up. Moreover, faced with worsening inter-related and apparently intractable problems, such as poverty, food security, inequality, climate change, the adequacy of the knowledge policy makers receive and act on is increasingly in question. Nowhere is this problem more acute than in the field of conflict prevention, management and resolution. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently in the western Sahel, where recent interventions have not produced the hoped-for outcomes, mean that there is a growing consensus within the academic and policy making audiences on the need for mid-level, locally-bound theories, which aim for both context and big picture in order to address the most critical gaps in knowledge that informs intervention. Although 'context is king' and policy is open to local conditions, actors and agendas, we argue that the development of geographically-bound mid-level theory, combined with learning across different regional contexts (Kang, 2014; Unsworth, 2015), could provide a useful way forward for Area Studies specialists as they seek to improve their policy impact and relevance. In the following section, we argue that a regional approach using insights from Comparative Area Studies could fill this 'knowledge gap'.

Utility of CAS in Policy Making

Proposed by Ahram (2011) and Sil (2020), Comparative Area Studies is a relatively new approach to qualitative and mixed methods research that aims to make Area Studies more attentive to theoretical grounding but also to address large-N statistical

analyses' failure to capture or explain important aspects of variation between and within regions. CAS offers three comparative modes: intra-regional (comparing entities within a geographic region or area), inter-regional (comparing different geographical regions or areas as whole analytical units), and cross-regional (comparing entities from different geographical regions or areas). Such comparisons have the potential to address the aforementioned policy theoretical and methodological needs. They allow engagement in mid-level theory building, offering empirical rigour and induction, to create concepts and causal analyses that are portable but sensitive to context (Sil & Ahram, 2020). An intra-regional comparative analysis presents the opportunity to generate what Ahram (2011) calls "bounded generalisations", whose focus on variation among clusters of similar cases is used to validate theory whilst being attentive to local dynamics and difference. Bounded generalisations originating in intra-regional analyses of conflicts in the Sahel could potentially be more useful to the Sahel Department policy makers than concepts generated by large-scale cross-regional analyses from different regions. However, cross-regional comparisons that assess the wider generalisability or potential for transferability of ideas could still be useful in terms of lessons learned for conflict, governance and other cadres. Findings resulting from combining these types of comparisons could inform the much-needed robust assessment, monitoring, and evaluation systems and formulations of theory of change that enable the design of conflict-aware security cooperation.

CAS has also the advantage of decentring knowledge, enabling a growing involvement of, and prominence for, voices from the Global South into theory creation. It offers the option of scaling up or down, allowing analysis of similar processes in sub-regions of a state. Conflicts in the Sahel take place in areas that have been excluded and marginalised from previous state-building and development projects designed by foreign actors. In Mali, "the donor darling of Africa" (Bergamaschi, 2014), aid practices have worsened the pre-2012 fragility context, with structural gaps enabling

and fuelling insurgent narratives. Opposite to achieving peace, it enabled what Kleinfeld (2017) named "privilege violence". Instability and violent conflict in these 'fuzzy' border areas do not stem from a state that is weak, overwhelmed and unable to fight violence, but from power structures that enable violence against some citizens to maintain extreme privilege and power. CAS examinations of social processes such as migration and violence that occur above, below and across country borders (Little, 2014) would help in better framing of humanitarian, development and conflict policy decisions and prevent the perpetuation of harm due to lack of attunement to local implementation contexts. Compared to global statistical approaches, it provides reliable region-specific knowledge about the multiple layers and interactions at social level.

Methodologies for Area Studies Comparison: How to Do It in Practice?

The previous two sections have established that Area Studies faces structural challenges in the provision of expert policy advice and that a Comparative Area Studies approach, particularly an intra-regional one, supplemented by cross-regional analysis in the case of the Sahel, is a potential way to bridge the gap between the wider needs of policy advice and the specific, contextualised area-dependent knowledge benefits offered by Area Studies (especially in the context of new digital approaches to research—see below). This final section considers one possible research approach that could be used to generate broader policy-relevant findings. The aim here is not to be exhaustive, but rather to stimulate debate on how a regionally-focused comparative approach to Area Studies research could take place in practice.

However, before reinventing the wheel in an effort to develop new practices of Comparative Area Studies, it is beneficial to consider briefly where Area Studies scholarship as traditionally conceived is likely to continue be most - or at least very - appropriate. While we have outlined above some of the perceived weaknesses of Area Studies scholarship in terms of policy relevance, it is important to note that the

specific relevance of findings on a given area will vary depending on the policy level, and certain parts of the policy making process (and individuals therein) will benefit from conventional Area Studies approaches. For example, country-focused research analysts in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office may be very interested in ideographic findings on single cases. Such findings could be directly relevant to their work. Likewise, while embassies abroad may seem less accessible than policy makers in Whitehall (given the distance, lack of interaction etc.), specific country or in-country level knowledge (that may be too specific for some policy makers in London or Brussels) may be very relevant for diplomats or analysts in the field. New technologies, growing internet coverage and practices developed and normalised in our current situation of remote working due to Covid-19, offer considerable opportunities for Area Studies colleagues to reach less accessible audiences.

However, this does not solve the wider problem of generating policy relevant findings. Data at the town, micro-regional (within country) or even country level may not be the optimum level for those policy makers tasked with thematic policy planning or those challenged with developing policy at the regional or sub-regional level (i.e. development spending on 'West Africa' or internally displaced people in 'the Levant' for example). This level is however where some of the biggest decisions get taken and potentially where there is the greatest scope for 'impact'. To be policy relevant at this level, alternative research strategies need to be deployed.

Comparative (interdisciplinary) Teams of Area and Thematic Specialists

Perhaps the best means by which one can conduct intra and cross-regional comparative Area Studies research is through large teams where individual experts on the different countries in a region are brought together to co-design and co-conduct research. In such cases each project contains the relevant area expertise in the form of the participants and each conducts research on their specific area of specialism, with the findings brought together at the level of the project. Such projects may be

particularly effective, if conducted with the involvement of international relations, political science or other specialists on the core thematic issue under investigation (whether it be armed violence, inclusive development etc.)—although interdisciplinary collaboration is not essential. Likewise, reflecting the opportunities of cross-regional analysis, it may be beneficial to bring in colleagues from other areas in other regions to gauge both how localised findings are to that region and to raise issues hitherto missed by the core regional research team. For example, research groups on Sahelian insecurity might include an expert on Syrian 'jihadist' groups.

Undoubtedly, such collaborations will require periods of learning, adjustment and a commonality of purpose that will allow colleagues to overcome disciplinary divisions—or even divisions between those working in different Area Studies traditions. It will also require deep engagement with methodology and theoretical approaches so as to avoid incommensurability. Or perhaps, more pragmatically, it may entail an acceptance of analytical eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstien, 2010) that would permit a willingness to merge and develop different forms of data. Conflicts in the Sahel are particularly hard to reach given their inaccessibility and the paucity of data (relative to the Middle East for example). Mixed methods approaches are therefore likely to be particularly beneficial, but at the same time are challenging from a methodological point of view.

Such engagements may well require access to funding (for shared fieldwork, meetings to discuss and disseminate findings) and this may be a drawback of this approach: it may be more expensive to have a team of researchers all working on a Sahelian regional project in the same way, than the same number doing their own individual research. However, new remote working technologies are likely to make this less of a problem. Indeed, the reducing cost of communication and increased means of remote working mean that scholars can build research teams across the Sahel, or other regions, more easily and cheaply than in the past. New technologies—increasingly

available in the region—facilitate the type of research arrangements we are advocating, as they augment the possibilities for teams to be built between area specialists in the global North and the global South and between colleagues in the global South without necessarily the involvement of the global North (traditionally those with access to greater research funding).

Such an approach presents a potentially very useful way to leverage Area Studies specialist knowledge towards thematically driven questions that go beyond one area case study. Large team-based projects and publications involving more than three/four scholars (perhaps as many as 10 people) are fairly rare in the social sciences and humanities but are of course common within certain areas of the natural sciences. They provide a key means to combine deep, area specialist knowledge with a wider regional focus that offers policy makers broad, but empirically rooted and regionally bounded findings.

Leveraging the New Opportunities of the Digital Realm

These types of research collaboration could be particularly useful in the context of rapidly expanding access to new forms of digital data. The wealth of information now available online and via social media makes accessing data on a new area of study easier than ever before. Sources that were only available in-country previously (such as newspapers) are now readily available online (often for free), archives are increasingly digitised and new forms of data from social media mean that one can get access to area-specific data (including from remote locations) very readily compared to the past.

There may be considerable benefits from collecting and analysing this data at a regional level, rather than a country level. However, while this means that including additional case research is easier than ever before, it also means the risks of (inadvertently) using data selectively or 'cherry picking' data increases. This is

particularly pronounced when one is conducting cross-country or intra-regional thematic analyses that explore a given phenomenon in a number of cases when one is not expert in all the cases (certainly an issue if one or two people seek to do an intra-regional analysis of jihadist activity in the Sahel that goes beyond a few cases for example). The increased quantity of data means that it is easy to prove a hypothesis or generate (possibly superficial) links between cases. Those without area specialist knowledge may lack the ability to distinguish a spurious connection from a meaningful one. What is difficult in the context of our current 'data deluge' is not necessarily accessing data, but rather determining good data from bad in the absence of detailed localised knowledge. However, structured projects built around different Area Studies specialists can be especially helpful in this regard. They allow the collection and analysis of new data sources across a regional space with fewer risks of selection bias (as each member of the team acts as a validity check of the wider findings in their case) and in so doing permits scholars to take advantage of the new possibilities of digital methods.

Conclusion

Area Studies has a lot to offer policy makers in situations like the current Sahel crisis. In a culturally diverse region where precolonial, colonial and postcolonial histories intersect with the transnational spread of jihadist ideas, area specialists are extremely well placed to make sense of this complex conflict. Indeed, in a number of ways described above the involvement of area specialists provides an indispensable source of expertise and a wealth of knowledge that acts both as a highly valuable check on ill-founded claims and as a potentially invaluable source of new findings. Yet at the same time, the thick description, idiographic approach of Area Studies does not lend itself readily to the broader questions that policy makers are often forced to ask—especially in regionalised conflicts.

In contexts like the Sahel, Comparative Area Studies (specifically intra-regional comparisons) offers an appropriate approach that offers a middle ground between large-N studies that may lack contextualization and deep ideographic case studies. This form of comparative analysis, especially when conducted by area specialist teams, aims to take advantage of area specialist knowledge and turn it to broader questions than would be ordinarily tackled by Area Studies scholars. Not so as to generate global generalisations or covering laws, but to develop bounded generalisations, draw highly contextualised links, to observe core patterns and to highlight key similarities. Crucially the objective must also be to understand the *limits* of these wider observations (indeed, this remains just as important as discovering broader findings in the first place).

This research note certainly does not provide all the answers to this conundrum. As touched on above there are many existing ways that Area Studies specialists can use existing methods to contribute to policy and there are no doubt other ways that Comparative Area Studies approaches could be operationalised. Rather, the objective of this note has been to open up dialogue and discussion on the way that policy makers can benefit from the wealth of Area Studies knowledge and to begin to explore how Area Studies and other disciplines can collaborate most effectively to generate policy relevant findings.

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