

Pentagon Using Universities to Prepare for Mass Civil Breakdown

[Nafeez Ahmed](#) | [The Guardian](#)

Social science is being militarised to develop 'operational tools' to target peaceful activists and protest movements

A US Department of Defense (DoD) research programme is funding universities to model the dynamics, risks and tipping points for large-scale civil unrest across the world, under the supervision of various US military agencies. The multi-million dollar programme is designed to develop immediate and long-term “warfighter-relevant insights” for senior officials and decision makers in “the defense policy community,” and to inform policy implemented by “combatant commands.”

Launched in 2008 – the year of the global banking crisis – the DoD 'Minerva Research Initiative' partners with universities “to improve DoD’s basic understanding of the social, cultural, behavioral, and political forces that shape regions of the world of strategic importance to the US.”

Among the projects awarded for the period 2014-2017 is a Cornell University-led study managed by the US Air Force Office of Scientific Research which aims to develop an empirical model “of the dynamics of social movement mobilisation and contagions.” The project will determine “the critical mass (tipping point)” of social contagions by studying their “digital traces” in the cases of “the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the 2011 Russian Duma elections, the 2012 Nigerian fuel subsidy crisis and the 2013 Gazi park protests in Turkey.”

Twitter posts and conversations will be examined “to identify individuals mobilised in a social contagion and when they become mobilised.”

Another project awarded this year to the University of Washington “seeks to uncover the conditions under which political movements aimed at large-scale political and economic change originate,” along with their “characteristics and consequences.” The project, managed by the US Army Research Office, focuses on “large-scale movements involving more than 1,000 participants in enduring activity,” and will cover 58 countries in total.

Last year, the DoD’s Minerva Initiative funded a project to determine ‘Who Does Not Become a Terrorist, and Why?’ which, however, conflates peaceful activists with “supporters of political violence” who are different from terrorists only in that they do not embark on “armed militancy” themselves. The project explicitly sets out to study non-violent activists:

“In every context we find many individuals who share the demographic, family, cultural, and/or socioeconomic background of those who decided to engage in terrorism, and yet refrained themselves from taking up armed militancy, even though they were sympathetic to the end goals of armed groups. The field of terrorism studies has not, until recently, attempted to look at this control group. This project is not about terrorists, but about supporters of political violence.”

The project’s 14 case studies each “involve extensive interviews with ten or more activists and militants in parties and NGOs who, though sympathetic to radical causes, have chosen a path of non-violence.”

I contacted the project’s principal investigator, Prof Maria Rasmussen of the US Naval Postgraduate School, asking why non-violent activists working for NGOs should be equated to

supporters of political violence – and which “parties and NGOs” were being investigated – but received no response.

Similarly, Minerva programme staff refused to answer a series of similar questions I put to them, including asking how “radical causes” promoted by peaceful NGOs constituted a potential national security threat of interest to the DoD.

Among my questions, I asked:

“Does the US Department of Defense see protest movements and social activism in different parts of the world as a threat to US national security? If so, why? Does the US Department of Defense consider political movements aiming for large scale political and economic change as a national security matter? If so, why? Activism, protest, ‘political movements’ and of course NGOs are a vital element of a healthy civil society and democracy – why is it that the DoD is funding research to investigate such issues?”

Minerva’s programme director Dr Erin Fitzgerald said “I appreciate your concerns and am glad that you reached out to give us the opportunity to clarify” before promising a more detailed response.

[Read full post](#)