# David Maxwell Interview Transcript

**Gray Zone Subject Matter Expert Interview Date: 14 June 2016**

**Interviewee:** Mr. David Maxwell | Associate Director | Georgetown University

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**Interviewer:** Ms. Sarah Canna | NSI

**Interview**

***Question: We are trying to understand whether and under what conditions violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) should be considered a threat in the gray zone. It seems that there are two schools of thought regarding this question: 1) only state actors operate in the gray zone, although they can use non-state actors as proxies, or 2) the changing nature of the international system has allowed VEOs and TCOs to rise to such a threat that they deserve to be considered in the gray zone space. Where do you stand on this? Do VEOs and TCOs belong in the definition of gray zone?***

**David Maxwell:** The issue with this question is that it is very target-centric and target-focused. We are approaching this by looking at targets in the gray zone, whether they are VEOs, TCOs, states, etc. This is the typical way of thinking in the military (i.e., what are the targets and who are the adversaries?). However, with respect to VEOs and TCOs in the gray zone, the most important thing to understand is the objective of the organization.

What we are missing in all of this is strategy. We typically try to organize everything into a nice, neat category or label, which for this research is exemplified through the significant effort being put into creating a definition of the gray zone. The gray zone in itself is ambiguous and complex, but we are trying to make it very precise.

When you ask if VEOs and TCOs should be part of the gray zone, in my opinion it does not matter. The broadest definition of the gray zone is that it is the space between peace and war. It is a space that includes competition and conflict. Competition is a very good description of what is taking place in the gray zone.

Given this, it would make sense to incorporate VEOs and TCOs into the definition of the gray zone because they are operating in this space and posing challenges to the international system, which is a fundamental part of the gray zone issue. Within the gray zone, there are states, non-state actors, organizations, etc. that are posing a challenge to the traditional international system. It is within US interests to ensure the international system continues to function; so, anything that threatens this system or is competing in this space, is part of the gray zone.

To me, though, whether or not you want to consider VEOs and TCOs part of the gray zone is a moot point. If VEOs and TCOs are competing in the gray zone space and pose a threat to the international system, our partners and allies, or to us and our interests, then we must ensure that we are able to address these gray zone problems and challenges.

Fundamentally, I criticize the idea of having to be focused on specific threats. However, in thinking broadly, VEOs and TCOs should be considered part of the gray zone because they operate in that space and pose challenges to us.

***Question: An expert that we spoke to noted that in one sense, if we are academically studying the gray zone and trying to figure out what it is, it is important to have a distinguished definition of the gray zone. However, on the other hand, if defining the gray zone more broadly helps with USG planning, strategy development, and Interagency coordination, then it makes more sense to include everything in the gray zone. It sounds like what you are saying aligns with defining the gray zone in a broader sense?***

**David Maxwell:** Absolutely. Our main focus should be on how we can do strategy better. We must ask ourselves: Does the gray zone help us to think strategically, think about the challenges we face, and help us to develop strategy that supports our policies and political objectives? Ultimately, whether it’s peace, war, gray zone, irregular warfare, or whatever else we want to call it, this is all about achieving our goals and political objectives. Therefore, the question becomes: If we are not at peace and we are not at war, then what are our political objectives?

We keep coming up with new names to describe conditions that may have existed in perpetuity. Fundamentally, I believe that the real problems in this gray zone space are revolution, resistance, and insurgency (RRI). VEOs and TCOs can exploit those conditions that cause instability and can lead to revolutions, political resistance, and insurgency, and these organizations will exploit those conditions for their own benefit. TCOs may not be seeking any political objectives, but they can exploit those conditions where others are seeking political change, which can help the TCO achieve its non-political objective by furthering its profits and expanding and protecting the organization. VEOs, on the other hand, do seem to pursue political objectives.

Both VEOs and TCOs exploit the conditions in countries around the world where there is poor governance and the potential for resistance, and these kinds of conditions can all merge together, which, all combined, really complicates things from an intelligence point of view for actors like the US whom are trying to ensure and maintain the international system.

***Question: You clearly have a very broad definition of the gray zone, so what does not fit into the definition of the gray zone?***

**David Maxwell:** I agree that having a precise definition of gray zone is necessary when doing academic studies and analyses, but to me the most important thing is the discussion surrounding the gray zone—not the specific definition. The answer to the question of, “what is in the gray zone and what is not in the gray zone,” is not important, but the thinking that goes into this question is important. One person might believe that VEOs and TCOs should go into the definition of the gray zone while another might not, but, regardless, the discussion about why and why not will help us improve our analytical abilities and allow us to conduct thorough assessments on which to develop campaign plans to support our strategy and policy.

We must understand how to assess the situation we face, so our focus should be placed on thinking about how using the gray zone concept helps us assess the situation so we can gain situational understanding, which we can then use to develop a campaign plan to support the strategy.

***Question: From a planning perspective, don’t you have to plan against a specific target? So, wouldn’t it make sense to have one plan for VEOs in the gray zone and another plan for states in the gray zone?***

**David Maxwell:** This is a fundamental problem. Since the end of the Cold War, defense planners have faced the challenge of not being able to plan against specific threats. It is much easier to plan against the Soviet Union than it is to plan against something that has happened in the gray zone space. After 9/11, the War on Terrorism made terrorism and Al Qaeda the threat. Today, the threats have morphed. We clearly understand today that Al Qaeda is not simply terrorists, but it is an organization with a strategy that uses terrorism as a tool in support of that strategy.

To your question, yes, planning against specific threats makes things much easier for the planners. However, the important question is: What is our policy? Is it going to be in our national policy to go after VEOs and TCOs in the gray zone? Are we going to plan against each of the organizations on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations? If this is our policy, then it becomes easier for our military and security forces to plan against VEOs and TCOs. However, other than our strategies against ISIL and Al Qaeda, this has not been, and does not seem likely to become, our policy going forward.

So, ultimately, yes, planning against specific targets, if that is what we want to do as a nation, will make things easier for our planners. However, I do not think we are going to get that kind of policy guidance from our senior leaders.

Notionally, yes, we can say we have a whole list of potential threats in the gray zone, and VEOs and TCOs certainly belong to this list. Although, this is not necessarily anything new. For example, think about what we have done to target TCOs in places like Columbia and with the war on drugs. Additionally, we have set up joint task forces in Asia and South America that are focused on drugs, which illustrates a clear policy guidance to focus on TCOs. This reinforces Adam Elkus who argues that none of this is new, and we are just looking at the same problems in a different way.

Back in 1994, we labeled low intensity conflicts other than war as “gray area phenomena.” We have created all kinds of labels for largely the same problems. Clausewitz said that we must understand the character of the war we are about to fight; but in the US Defense establishment, it seems that before we understand the war we are about to fight, we must come up with a name for it—the term gray zone seems to be just another example of this. We resurrected “counterinsurgency” and “irregular warfare” after 9/11, and on the other hand we did not like “the global war on terrorism” or “the long war.” We seem to be so enamored with finding the right name. I am all for finding the right name, as long as we are using the concept to help us develop better strategy.

Ultimately, the efficacy of the gray zone depends on whether or not it helps us think about supporting a strategy we want to execute and helps us in understanding the nature of the threats, and conditions that give rise to those threats, we face around the world.

***Question: Why do we have a new term for something that has been going on for a long time? Could it be that the term “gray zone” is a response to the information and technology revolution that has empowered individuals and groups in a way that has never been seen before? Does this explain the need for the new “gray zone” term? Is there an already existing term that encompasses what we are trying to get at with gray zone?***

**David Maxwell:** There is nothing that fits perfectly, and there is certainly nothing that everyone will agree on. There are so many people and perspectives looking at this problem space, and, as a result, so many different opinions. Ultimately, though, is it the name/term/label that we really need to be focused on?

I agree that there have been significant developments in modern technology and networking, but all of these new networks are still based on fundamental principles that have existed throughout the course of history. Modern technology makes it easier for these networks and organizations to function, and provides them with some new advantages.

***Question: In one of your writings you say that the gray zone is where revolution, resistance, and insurgency takes place. It is clear that we cannot care about everything in the gray zone, so at what level do VEO and TCO activities reach a significant level of threat to be considered a relevant part of the gray zone? For example, the US does not really care about Basque separatists, right?***

**David Maxwell:** We are looking at this purely from a US perspective. To Spain, the Basque separatists represent a resistance organization that poses a serious threat. The US, however, is certainly not directly threatened by Basque separatists. In my opinion, though, the Basque separatists are clearly operating in the gray zone—but in Spain’s perceived gray zone and not the US’ perceived gray zone. The Basque separatists seem to represent a good example of a non-state actor operating in the gray zone; Spain is not at war, but it is facing a legitimate resistance.

Frank Hoffman has a great construct in which he defines the gray zone as competition that occurs before violence occurs. In his construct, once violence occurs, the situation evolves into terrorism or irregular warfare or something else, and is no longer classified as being in the gray zone. This is a useful spectrum to apply to looking at the gray zone.

***Question: Another SME explained to us his belief that the only aspect of the current conflict in Iraq and Syria that falls within the gray zone is the involvement of Russia and the US, and their separate interests, in the regional conflict; the SME did not believe that the Shia-Sunni conflict in Iraq and Syria should be classified within the gray zone. Do you agree with this?***

**David Maxwell:** The Shia-Sunni struggle in Iraq and Syria definitely represents an existential conflict in the region. I would agree that this Shia-Sunni situation has developed beyond the gray zone and into conflict.

We can argue about whether or not various actors view the situation as within the gray zone, but the important part of all of this is having that discussion, and not simply focusing on the answer. Having this discussion will help provide us with a better understanding of the conflicts and how they impact us, Russia, Shia, Sunni, etc. Then, in an ideal situation, we would use that understanding to develop the necessary policy, objective, strategy, and campaign plan to achieve our interests and political objective.

Sometimes we try to be too definitive and focus too much on trying to get the right answer. However, the answer to the test question is not whether or not something falls into the gray zone; the answer to the test question is whether or not we are able to achieve our policy objectives. Whether or not we are able to achieve our policy objectives is the single definition of success that we have to focus on. Understanding what is in or not in the gray zone is not that important; rather, understanding our policy objectives and what we are doing to achieve those objectives is what is important. The discussion of the gray zone can help us to better assess the situation and gain the situational understanding that we need to develop courses of action and plans to achieve our objectives.

***Question: It sounds like how one views the gray zone clearly depends on their point of view and where they are standing in the world. Furthermore, when I think about gray zone, there seem to be two areas of focus from the US perspective: 1) how we perceive threats, which gets to defining the gray zone and its characteristics, and 2) how we influence the environment, which gets to outward influencing capacity using gray or soft tools. One aspect of the SMA gray zone project is focused on mapping the soft levers of power within the USG. When thinking about soft levers of power within the USG, people typically point to the State Department and USAID, but can you think of any non-traditional USG tools or partners that we could use to exert influence in the gray zone?***

**David Maxwell:** When thinking about non-traditional tools, the question is: Can we orchestrate the instruments of power of the US? We have DIME. There are also a lot of other tools that exist that we can think about, but in a lot of cases we do not have a way to make them part of a campaign. To operate in the gray zone from a government perspective, we have to have a campaign because the non-government aspects of power simply cannot be fully controlled by our government. We can try to create conditions with our policies to allow business and non-government entities to work in this gray zone space, but the USG cannot achieve full control of operation.

We try too hard to shape and influence things. It is great to say that we are going to shape attitudes, win hearts and minds, and stop people from becoming radicalized, but it is quite unclear whether or not the USG is really capable of actually effectively doing any of these things. For example, it does not currently appear that we are capable of directly preventing radicalization. Shaping and influencing efforts are problematic. We have to deal with the world the way it is. We create all sorts of ways to make ourselves feel good about what we are doing, but we need to take a step back and consider whether or not it is really effective.

Dealing with violent extremists is one of the issues that is quite difficult for the US to deal with. We are trying to deal with them directly, rather than fully understanding why they exist and what they are trying to address and achieve. One of our biggest problems is: Do we really understand what VEOs are trying to achieve? It seems that a lot of what VEOs are trying to achieve relates to the Shia-Sunni conflict, and has little to do with the US. Therefore, a lot of what VEOs are trying to accomplish does not represent a direct threat to the US.

With respect to soft tools within the USG, the State Department and USAID are clear resources. USAID has done a lot of work with democracy programs in which USAID helps countries develop democratic institutions by providing things like communications tools. It would be quite interesting to organize a study on the work USAID has done in Syria to look at how the democracy programs helped the Syrian people in resisting the Assad regime, and how that resistance helped lead to the Syrian civil war. USAID has done a good job in helping people help themselves in determining their own political way ahead, and USAID provides the tools to help these people do so. USAID certainly has soft tools that can be very useful in these gray zone environments, particularly when we are dealing with oppressive governments.

Interestingly, this discussion has not gotten to the point where we have talked about direct intervention. However, to an outsider, it would seem that the US perspective is to acknowledge the existence of this gray zone space and its conditions, which then leads to the USG taking steps to apply various instruments of power—primarily military power—to go and achieve US objectives in the gray zone space. Even though the US does not necessarily want to go and intervene, gray zone discussions and debates typically lead to the point where the US is going to go and do something.

A key question in the gray zone is: How do we decide not to do something? Looking at what does or does not fall within the gray zone, leads us to a very important decision of potentially choosing not to do something, which in this day and age is problematic because everyone tends to call for US leadership. This has created a paradox in the Middle East: on the one hand, we know that the problems have to be solved by the countries in the region; however, on the other hand, a lot of the times things will not get done without US leadership, but if the US leads (defined by boots on the ground) we dis-incentivize those countries from solving their own problems because they expect us to do it for them. This is one of the most complex paradoxes that exists today for the USG.

We have to find a way in which we can support our friends, partners, and allies without being in the lead. Even in Iraq and Syria today, we have limited our military actions, but in many ways it feels as though we have taken the lead. Supporting our friends, partners, and allies without being in the lead does not lend itself to quick, short-term solutions, which is another paradox we face. Everything in the gray zone is complex, and can be characterized as requiring long-term efforts and solutions, but this goes against our strategic culture in which we need decisive, overwhelming, and immediate victory. Gray zone conditions just do not lend themselves to this paradigm in which we want to operate.

**Discussion**

***Question: In some of your work, you have mentioned our strategy gap. In your mind, how should the existing Interagency processes or government units be leveraged to address this problem we have with strategy and our strategy gap.***

**David Maxwell:** This is exactly what the gray zone is, a strategy gap. We do not have a strategy for operating in the gray zone space.

With respect to the mechanics of the Interagency, I think there are a couple of problems.

First, we are lacking a national security core. We have uniformed commissioned military officers, commissioned foreign services officers, and commissioned intelligence officers, but we do not have a core of commissioned national security officers (i.e., real practitioners who understand the national security apparatus). There are only two organizations within the USG that truly have national security as its primary mission: the Department of Defense and CIA. Clearly the State Department and USAID focus on national security, but the State Department’s primary mission is diplomacy and USAID’s primary mission is development. Other agencies also make important contributions to national security, but national security writ large is not the primary focus. I think we need to have a professional national security core of professionals that operate throughout all of the executive agencies and focuses on helping the president and the National Security Council orchestrate instruments of power to support national security and the national security strategy.

The other aspect of this is the National Security Council. We have to relook at whether or not the president should always have complete carte blanche in organizing the national security apparatus. This is how we currently operate. We do not have a national security advisor that is confirmed by the Senate, and the national security structure is different for each president. I think we have to create a hybrid structure in which there is a core national security council at the foundation, and then each president can appoint political appointees around that core. We need a core of professionals that are trained, educated, and on a career path in which they are focused on national security at the national level throughout the Interagency.

Functionally, we lack a disciplined process. This is because each president sets up their own unique processes. I like to think about when President Clinton signed Presidential Decision Directive 56 in May 1997. This is worth taking a look at. It provided a process for the Interagency to look at complex contingencies. It was a process that was disciplined and forced all of the agencies of the executive branch to do their own mission analyses and develop their own estimates of the situation, which were then used to develop their own courses of action and supporting campaign plans. The agencies were then all brought together to share what they were doing to support the policy and strategy. It was a good process that was never really used. In one instance, it was used as a training vehicle to look at North Korea. However, Presidential Decision Directive 56 did not carry over into the Bush administration. The Bush administration created its own process, but it never matched the integrated discipline that was provided by Presidential Decision Directive 56.

***Question: Is there a connection between our difficulties with defining the gray zone—and our obsession with defining and naming these types of problems—and this lack of overall strategy and articulation of US interests when it comes to national security? Is this where some of the ambiguity surrounding the gray zone stems from?***

**David Maxwell:** Our weakness is that we are unable to develop strategy with balance and coherence amongst ends, ways, and means. We fail to fully understand the threats, opportunities, and risks that exist, and therefore are unable to understand and base our planning on good, solid assumptions.

The national security strategy is not really a strategy. We have never really written a strategy at the national level. Our strategies have not been strategies; they are largely just aspirational. If you look at the Defense Strategic Guidance from 2012, our primary military missions are irregular warfare and counterterrorism and deter and defend against aggression. It goes on to talk about conducting light footprint operations, advising and assisting our allies, working through the indirect approach, building partner capacity, and not sizing our military to conduct large-scale expeditionary stability operations. Yes, we are following this guidance pretty well, but the guidance is essentially a list of ways in which we are going to do things. We are following the guidance, but we’re not achieving our political objectives.

I do not think we have a good understanding of how to do strategy at the national level. We do politics well, but we are not doing strategy the way in which it should be done. We will adjust the ways and means somewhat, but we rarely reexamine the ends. For example, we should be looking at our strategy to degrade and destroy ISIL. Are we doing this? Have we provided the ways and means to accomplish this? If it is our mission and strategy to destroy ISIL, are we actually doing that? Or, are we effectively influencing our friends, partners, and allies to destroy ISIL? Perhaps, maybe our strategy against ISIL should instead be that we are going to degrade ISIL and help our friends, partners, and allies to destroy ISIL. The problem is that our strategy says that we are going to destroy ISIL, but we have not done that. Maybe this will take a long time, but this is also not clearly defined in the strategy. Ultimately, I do not think we are doing strategy well.

If the gray zone offers us an avenue for thinking strategically and helps us to understand our enemies’ strategies, then we can develop strategies to counter them and attack their strategies. The highest form of strategy is to be able to attack the enemy’s strategy, not necessarily their forces. This is why I am somewhat optimistic about the gray zone and find it useful—the gray zone concept helps us to have these debates to understand the conditions, threats, and strategies, and then helps us to think more strategically.

***Question: What haven’t I asked you that I should have in order to understand the role of VEOs and TCOs in the gray zone, or what point would you like to emphasize?***

**David Maxwell:** We need to think about if we are going to become comfortable operating in this space. Are we going to have national leadership that is willing to recognize the challenge that exists in this ambiguous gray zone space between peace and war? We have plenty of ways to describe this space: hybrid, irregular, political warfare, etc., but are we going to become comfortable doing strategy in this space? This is a key question that the USG must think about.

The other key question is: Can we develop policies and political objectives for the competition that is taking place in this ambiguous gray zone space between peace and war? Are we going to inform the national leadership on what can and cannot be done in that space, and help educate and influence people for how we should think strategically in this space?