

Books on Terrorism: Review Essay

By Joshua Sinai

To understand the nature and magnitude of the terrorist warfare in all its configurations, which constitutes one of the primary security threats facing the international community, as well as the components of effective response; the academic and think tank communities have produced a myriad of books. Some of these are of exceptional quality and provide insight that advances our understanding of these issues. Others, unfortunately, are of dubious value because not only are their arguments weak, but they lack the necessary documentation to substantiate what are often sensationalistic claims. In the following three reviews, the first review illustrates the latter problem, while the final two reviews compliment the authors' exceptional insight on the role of anti-modern religious extremism in driving contemporary religiously fundamentalist terrorist insurgencies.

A Dubious Source: Counterterrorism Book Falls Short

Countering Terrorism: Can We Meet the Threat of Global Violence? (Reaktion Books, \$22.95, 240 pages)

Michael Chandler and Rohan Gunaratna argue that the United States and its allies have squandered their opportunity to defeat the terrorist threat posed by al Qaeda and its affiliates. The authors find the United States and its allies "have not appreciably reduced the threat," which is growing significantly across the world, stretching from Asia to Europe.

Principally, America has failed by acting unilaterally and not cooperatively, for instance through the United Nations, and by seeking short-term political expediency, such as intervening in Iraq (termed a "strategic defeat") and allowing Iran's geopolitical role to grow.

To effectively meet the challenges contemporary terrorism poses, the authors recommend, "it is necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the threat." A cogent understanding of the threat and the means necessary to counter it, however, are not found in this volume.

This is, in fact, two books combined into one: Mr. Gunaratna's often disjointed, sensationalistic, and difficult to follow assessments of the threat posed by al Qaeda and its networked affiliates, and Mr. Chandler's recommendation for international cooperation as the means for effective counterterrorism, without showing how it can be executed.

Mr. Gunaratna heads the terrorism research center at the formerly named Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore. His chapters consist of undocumented claims, and, as if this were not bad enough, exaggerated self-promotion.

In an assertion bound to evoke derision in U.S. government counterterrorism circles, Mr. Gunaratna writes that "while much of the threat posed by al Qaeda is known and manageable, the multiple threats posed by its associates and affiliated entities have not been fully studied and assessed. Even within the U.S. intelligence community... there are very few specialists who know and understand the Islamist terrorist groups associated or affiliated with al Qaeda. The real threat to the West comes from the politicized and radicalized migrant and diaspora communities."

This is an affront to all who deal with these issues; the implication is that only Mr. Gunaratna understands the problem. In fact, many experts who study al Qaeda know the information he relays.

Moreover, while reviewing his sections I found more than 100 unsourced claims. For example, he estimates the current strength of al Qaeda is "a few hundred members." In Yemen, he claims, "only 35 percent of the country is under government control." (What does this really mean?) The late Abu Musab Zarqawi's Iraq network has "either absorbed" or "influences" other Salafi jihadi networks to become "one of the most serious terrorist threats to the European continent and beyond to North America." (On the contrary, terrorism in Europe is largely indigenous, not Iraqi-affiliated).

The list goes on. "Al Qaeda was responsible for attacking the World Trade Towers in 1993." (In fact, a loose affiliate was involved, but not al Qaeda). "Several hundred al Qaeda operatives, led by Saif al-Adel and Saad bin Laden, are located in Iran" ("Several hundred"? Does this mean most of al Qaeda is hiding in Iran? Aren't they in Pakistan's Waziristan province?). By "2004-5 al Qaeda related cells existed in some 60-70 countries around the world." (Which countries and how large are their cells?). And, finally, "more than 300 radicalized Muslims living in Europe have traveled to Iraq and experienced the jihad." (Where's the proof?).

Since none of these figures and estimates is documented, the reader is left wondering if Mr. Gunaratna invented them. His portions of the book, as a result, cannot be taken seriously.

Mr. Chandler's chapters, on the other hand, are well reasoned, reflecting the sound judgment and experience of a former British Army officer who also served as the chairman of the U.N. group established in 2001 to monitor sanctions against the Taliban and the al Qaeda network.

To Mr. Chandler, reducing terrorism requires resolving four problem areas: transforming Islam into a more tolerant religion, harnessing the world's clergy to fight religious intolerance, fostering coexistence for Muslim minorities in Western societies and solving regional conflicts, such as the Palestinian-Israeli one. International collaboration, whether through the U.N. framework or among governments, is key to counterterrorism effectiveness, he believes.

These recommendations are reasonable, but insufficient. To dismantle terrorism, deep-rooted problems in Muslim societies must be resolved, centering on improving the relationship between orthodox religion and modernity. It also requires encouraging governments committed to creating opportunities for all their citizens to advance economically, socially and politically. Lacking such a solution, the pool for potential terrorists keeps growing.

As a result, this book cannot be recommended as an authoritative source on counterterrorism.

To the Extreme: When Faith Becomes Fanaticism

Neil J. Kressel, "Bad Faith: The Danger of Religious Extremism" (Prometheus Books, 327 pages; \$26.00).

Al Qaeda and its myriad affiliates — whether as organized groups or self-radicalized "wannabes" — pose a grave threat to international security because they believe themselves to be divinely inspired to carry out mass destruction against their "apostate" adversaries all over the world.

The threat radical Islamists pose is not merely terrorist warfare but religio-cultural warfare, as well. This is directed against Western values as well as mainstream Muslim tendencies. Salafi Islam, their primary religious identity, is anti-modern and nihilistic (which is why they turn to terrorist tactics to strike at their adversaries), so it is important to understand why their adherents opt for a violent form of religious extremism rather than more constructive and progressive religious ideologies.

These are the central issues facing the counterterrorism community as it searches for solutions to the kind of terrorist activities that threaten the survival of our civilization.

In "Bad Faith: The Danger of Religious Extremism," Neil J. Kressel, a professor of psychology at William Paterson University, incisively addresses these issues.

What is religious extremism? To Mr. Kressel, whose previous books include "Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror," religious extremists are "those persons who — for reasons they themselves deem religious — commit, promote or support purposely hurtful, violent, or destructive acts toward those who don't practice their faith."

It is not only Islam that fosters religious extremism, Mr. Kressel points out. Christianity and Judaism have their share of anti-secularists who elevate sacred religious texts, such as the Bible or Koran, to a position of supreme authority in a state. However, fundamentalist believers in these three religions adhere to "widely divergent perspectives."

What sets Islamic extremism apart from extremism in Christianity and Judaism, in the modern world, is that their fundamentalist believers form a larger percentage in the

Muslim world, their ideology is filled with hatred and "the consequences [and destruction] they have produced are worlds apart." In other words, today's Islamic extremists are far more dangerous than other religious fundamentalists.

What are the characteristics of religious beliefs that lead to extremist militancy and terrorism? According to Mr. Kressel, such beliefs assert that non-believers are destined for eternal damnation, non-believers are hated by God, non-believers must not blaspheme against God, faith should be spread by military means, people cannot freely convert out of their religion, non-believers are not allowed to live in geographical locations controlled by members of the dominant religion, any method is justified if it is used to implement God's will, and God prefers men to women, with women living in a subjugated role.

While many of these beliefs characterize elements in mainstream religions (Orthodox Judaism, for example, opposes the ordination of women as rabbis and imposes sanctions on inter-marriage), Mr. Kressel argues that "the danger is greatest when individuals and ideologies embrace four tendencies: 1) opposition to compromise with those who see things differently; 2) acceptance of religious ends as justification for any means; 3) willingness to assume the role of defender of God's honor by punishing all those who show disrespect; and 4) a drive to obtain heavenly rewards without regard for the earthly consequences of behavior." The latter tendency, in particular, is responsible for influencing the practice of suicide "martyrdom" operations by Islamic terrorists.

While Mr. Kressel is critical of religious extremism, this is emphatically not an anti-religion treatise. He recommends that once a religiously extremist minority within a religion begins to act violently, then mainstream leaders must immediately identify and "self-police" such outbreaks. In this way, constructive elements have the best chance of overtaking destructive ones.

As Mr. Kressel concludes, "only Muslims can delegitimize and root out Muslim extremists in a lasting way. The struggle must come from within and, despite the West's vast resources, good intentions, and occasionally important support, this must, ultimately, be a battle waged by Muslims for the heart of their culture."

All those in the counterterrorism community who wish to understand and respond to the characteristics of religious extremism that lead to terrorism will greatly benefit from reading Mr. Kressel's important book.

Fighting Modernity: The Causes of Terrorism

Michael Mazarr, Unmodern Men in the Modern World: Radical Islam, Terrorism, and the War on Modernity (Cambridge University Press, 2007), \$19.99, 304 pages.

The al Qaeda "brand" of Salafi Islam seeks to galvanize its adherents to "revitalize" the Muslim world by imposing on their respective societies the Shariah legal regime, free of what they consider to be corrupting Western influences. What makes this threat so

significant is that this "revitalization" of "true Islam" is occurring in the most modernized regions of the world, such as Western Europe and North America, and in Muslim lands where the Salafists consider the ruling elites to be apostates.

This question is at the top of our national security agenda, as everyone tries to figure out these retrogressive rebellions' root causes and effective countermeasures. Interestingly, Congress is so concerned about this threat that it is in the process of establishing a national commission and a separate university center to study radicalization and home-grown terrorism in the United States.

For such a commission to be effective, however, it must view the radicalization processes that lead to today's militant Islamist-driven terrorism as rooted not only in real world grievances (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, trouble in Kashmir, and so on), but as an expression of the conflict between tradition and modernity because of the nature of the anti-modern "brand" of religion that these extremists promote.

In this context, since much has been written on militant Islam's political grievances, the congressional commission and all those involved in studying these issues would greatly benefit from reading Michael Mazarr's important book, "Unmodern Men in the Modern World: Radical Islam, Terrorism, and the War on Modernity." It is one of the best diagnoses of the resentment by Islamist forces toward modernity, which has led them to utilize terrorism to retaliate against the effects of modernity on traditional life in their respective societies.

In one of his many insightful passages, Mr. Mazarr, a professor at the National War College, writes that modernization challenges the religious and spiritual element of tradition by threatening to secularize society "in order to replace a religious view of the world with a scientific, rationalist one... modernization and modernity place faith under stress, call it into greater question, threaten to trade it out in favor of rationalist humanism. And one result, unsurprisingly, is a flight back to religion, so that the actual effect of modernization in many contexts is an upwelling of devotion."

The opposition to modernity leads to terrorism when several factors converge. Mr. Mazarr cites Emanuel Sivan, a prominent Israeli expert on Islam, who formulated the notion of the "triad" of radical Islamism: "the diagnosis — modernity as jahaliyya [ignorance of the faith]; the cure — rebellion (first internal, then external); the means for administering that cure — the tali-a (vanguard) of the True Believers organized as a counter-society."

How are the Islamic militants expressing anti-modernism? According to Mr. Mazarr, the Islamists believe that the "social devastation" of the Muslim world can only be redressed by emulating "the pure moral life practiced by the Prophet and his immediate followers" and expelling "evil outside influences — Israel and the United States chief among them" from Muslim lands.

What can be done to counter the anti-modern components in Islamic militancy?

Mr. Mazarr recommends that "to degrade the terrorist organizations and discredit their ideology" requires America to encourage the resolution of underlying problems by promoting "peaceful, even if sometimes radical, social change" in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, as well as supporting the peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in order to demonstrate that "violence is unnecessary for reform." In a further step, Mr. Mazarr calls for the United States to engage in dialogue and negotiation with militant Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, as long as they begin to speak "openly and directly about the evil of terrorism."

I agree with Mr. Mazarr that the threat presented by militant Islam must be countered in a comprehensive fashion, with every aspect resolved through conciliation, where possible, or law enforcement and military measures, where it is not.

However, his solution, which focuses primarily on reducing violence, still does not address the underlying problem of how modernized society can persuade religious militants to embrace the best characteristics of modernity, such as democracy, pluralism, freedom of expression, separation of church and state, religious liberalism, gender equality, and technological and scientific progress. Under current conditions, such a counterterrorism policy may be too difficult and complex to implement, but what other solutions are possible?

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