

## Book Reviews

Mark Perry. *How to Lose the War on Terror*. London, Hurst & Company, 2010. Reviewed by Jason Rineheart.

Mark Perry's recent book *How to Lose the War on Terror* provides a concise and nuanced look on the complicated events that unfolded in the Middle East after September 11, 2001. Perry, the director of *Conflicts Forum*, is not the armchair post-9/11 pundit on terrorism or Islamic extremism that we too often see; he has been talking to terrorists and Islamists having traveled and lived in the Middle East for over twenty years.

The first half of Perry's volume is dedicated to the events that evolved in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. He highlights and criticizes the decisions made by Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to rid the Iraqi government of former Bathists and to dismantle the Iraqi military, which created the Iraqi insurgency that bogged down the U.S. military and contributed significantly to Iraq's insecurity. Perry's book reads like a suspense novel, providing the reader with a first-hand narrative of the talks that took place between the American military personnel and the Iraqi tribal and business leaders who had close ties to the Sunni insurgency in the al-Anbar province. This portion of the book takes the reader from the streets of al-Anbar and the meeting rooms in Amman, Jordan, to the halls of the Pentagon, outlining how America eventually decided that negotiating an end to the cycle of violence was in the mutual interest of both the U.S. military and Iraq's Sunni insurgency; mainly because both had a common enemy – foreign fighters associated with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Perry rightly and convincingly argues that the U.S. had to engage its enemies to settle the security impasse. He correctly concludes that it was important for the U.S. to separate the Iraqi nationalist insurgents, whose main motivations were ending the American occupation and getting its piece of the political pie in a Shia dominated government, from the foreign fighters associated with al-Qaeda who were largely focused on leading an Islamic revolution by using indiscriminate violence against whoever disagreed with them.

The second half of Perry's book is dedicated to the meetings that he and several other American and Europeans had with the leaders of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslims Brotherhood in 2005. His major argument is that the U.S. must recognize that so-called 'corrigible terrorists' groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are fundamentally different organizations than al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Again, with an abundance of first-hand evidence, Perry presents a narrative straight from the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, outlining their rationales as both political parties and armed resistance movements. He argues that both Hamas and Hezbollah are more legitimate resistant movements by virtue of having significant popular support from their local constituencies and due to their willingness to work within existing political processes. The chapter on Hezbollah is probably the most interesting. To be sure, Hezbollah is not just another

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terrorist organization to be taken lightly. Its mass following as a fully functioning political organization that is willing to work within the Lebanese political system, its ability to provide important social services in southern Lebanon, and its capacity to maintain its status as a heavily armed terrorist organization point to the fact that Hezbollah is a crucial player in the region and one that the U.S. must address. Perry's analysis of the complicated and highly contentious political landscape that developed after the assassination of Lebanese president Rafiq al-Harriri is probably one of the most even-handed descriptions available.

Yet what does this book tell us about why America should talk to terrorists or risk losing the war on terror? Perry's main argument which runs throughout the book is that America successfully engaged its enemies to settle the violent conflict in Iraq, and, presumably, this tactic of engagement could be replicated to end the conflicts between the U.S. and other more corrigible terrorist antagonists like Hamas and Hezbollah. Additionally, as Perry argues, the U.S. should stop aggregating terrorist groups and classifying them all as "evildoers"; rather, it should view them as credible movements with rational political objectives. But Perry's overarching argument does suffer from a few analytical pitfalls. The negotiations that took place between the Iraqi insurgency and Americans were ad hoc agreements reached between the American military and the Sunni tribal leaders of al-Anbar during a wartime situation. And this dialogue occurred in the early stages of a broader counterinsurgency campaign being developed and implemented by the American military, bypassing the U.S. Department of State, the agency that would lead any future political negotiations with Hamas or Hezbollah. But why should the U.S. divert from its long-standing "no concessions" counterterrorism policy and engage in political negotiations with Hamas and Hezbollah? Again, it is difficult to find convincing arguments. Of course Hamas and Hezbollah represent fundamentally different threats and have more justifiable ideologies and goals than an incorrigible terrorist group like al-Qaeda. But, as many terrorism scholars have continually pointed out, terrorist groups are not defined based on the legitimacy of their socio-political goals, but rather because of the tactics they use (deliberately targeting non-combatants with the intention to spread fear to a wider audience) to pursue them. The question then becomes, since Hamas and Hezbollah have legitimate political followings and have shown a willingness to work within more or less democratic political systems, why don't they renounce terrorism, take steps towards disarmament, and engage fully in their respective political systems? If rational political goals are truly their credos and America is simply too ignorant to understand that then they should consider renouncing terrorism and leaving armed resistance behind. A major concern for the U.S. would, with respect to engagement, be this: if it chooses to divert from its "no concessions" counterterrorism policy and negotiates with terrorists today, then what new groups or splinter groups with justifiable goals will it be negotiating with tomorrow?

To conclude: Perry's book provides a brilliant first-hand narrative of the very complex political situations in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq; it is accessible to both the practitioner

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and the academic researcher. Yet, in the view of this reviewer, it is lacking persuasive arguments on why the U.S. would lose the 'war on terror' if it does not talk to terrorists.

*About the Reviewer: **Jason Rinehart** is a postgraduate student in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews and a Research Assistant with the Terrorist Research Initiative.*