

IV. Book Reviews

John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* [Revised and updated second edition]. New York, NY: Routledge: 2014. 184 pages, US\$170.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-415-69800-9; US\$42.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-415-69802-3.

Reviewed by Jeff Victoroff

Less than a decade ago, to read the entire unclassified English language literature on the psychology of terrorism was entirely doable. Now it's not. So what should one read? John Horgan's new book is an authentically excellent point of departure.

First, two disclaimers: I am a biologist in spirit. Biology explains the mechanisms and ultimate causes of animal behavior. In contrast, psychology focuses on emergent abstractions such as "happiness" or "internalization." Candidly, notions such as "fundamental attribution error" are interesting to talk about, but it is not immediately apparent how they will help Bostonians keep their legs. Still, a disciplinary framework may be unimportant. As Hippocrates said, what works is good. The discipline of psychology has indeed offered many ideas that prove valuable for enhancing human security. Second, I like John Horgan. We share a ferocious devotion to empiricism. Entirely apart from his exceptional capacity for clear thinking and writing, I think he's a great guy who truly wants to figure out the truth.

Prof. Horgan is a senior scholar in the field of psychology, and Director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. His new book, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, is a revised and expanded second edition. It is better than the first (published in 2005), and, leaping to a recommendation, deserves sharp attention from both scholars and "practitioners" (a term that describes a loose conglomerate of leaders, policy makers, diplomats, police, war fighters, and hard working spooks). Horgan mostly confines his attention to substate group terrorism, even stating "it is clear that terrorism is a group process" (p. 105). This leaves out some pieces of the pie, but is a sensible focus for a short book.

The author declares his priorities up front. He distinguishes between dated efforts to understand "the terrorist mind" and recent efforts to uncover exploitable facts about the psychosocial development, engagement, and disengagement of people attracted to the terrorist lifestyle. What Horgan derogates as the "mentalist" strain of terrorism studies refers to the main goal of earlier scholarship. There was a decades-long quest to answer the question "what makes terrorists psychologically different?" It is entirely possible that someday empirical research will make progress in answering that question—not by identifying a profile of the typical terrorist, but simply by identifying psychological or cognitive traits that are statistically more prevalent among terrorists than among matched non-terrorists with similar backgrounds. For instance, perhaps someday high quality studies will show that a need for cognitive closure is observed more frequently among adolescents who go on to become terrorists compared with those who don't.

But what would such studies yield, beyond discussions at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)? Like philosophy, such studies would be fun, but what profit is gained toward the interests of national security? Dr. Horgan is interested in meaningful results. He clearly cares about whether advances in psychological knowledge might save lives: "...a real urgency is upon us now to develop a straightforward and unambiguous understanding of the process whereby individuals and groups turn to terrorism, and . . . how policy makers might employ that knowledge in the development of counterterrorism initiatives"(p. 77).

The first 76 pages of this 184-page book comprise a critical review of earlier research on the psychology of

terrorism. This bare-bones introduction is surely among the most compact and useful of such overviews; it will help beginners appreciate the awkward fits and starts of these early studies. Experts will need to hang in there until later in the text, when Horgan begins to fulfill his promise of discussing recent, meaningful advances. The author emphasizes several points that distinguish his approach from that of others. First, it is very important to acknowledge dissimilarity/heterogeneity. Empirical evidence tends to debunk any single model of why people get involved with terrorism. For example, recent research by Dyer and Simcox (2013) suggested five different categories of involvement among 171 al-Qaeda members. Second, the poorly defined term *radicalization*—the focus of much attention after 2005—may be a red herring. The danger comes not necessarily from radicals, but from terrorists. For instance, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals arguably stake out radical positions, but they do not typically use violence. The Animal Liberation Front, in contrast, commits acts of terror. Which group should we study and counteract? Horgan suggests that excessive attention to radicalization, which is just a part of the spectrum of opinion that challenges the status quo, distracts from the life-saving work of reducing terrorism.

Third, Horgan strongly emphasizes his distinction between involvement in terrorism as a *state* and involvement as a *process*—a progression of “lots of little steps” toward affiliation with a terrorist movement, pursued for any number of reasons, to play any number of roles, but in part to attain status. Fourth, he states that so-called “root causes” of terrorism are not root causes. Social injustice, for example, may be a *precondition* for the emergence of terrorism, but it hardly determines that result. Indeed, there is far more social injustice in the world than terrorism. Fifth, Horgan agrees that very few people exposed to conflict become terrorists. This is the indisputable fact that suggests, contrary to those who deny it, that terrorists are indeed different. But that hardly means all of them are different in the same way or to the same degree. Horgan characterizes the tiny subset who become involved as exhibiting the nonspecific quality he calls “*openness to engagement*.” In the absence of empirical data suggesting a common trait, his amorphous concept of openness to engagement is about as good as it gets in defining the mysterious and diverse combinations of innate, developmental, and social factors that explain why widely varying individuals get involved.

Overall, Horgan urges us to set aside the “why” of terrorism studies and devote more attention to the “how,” since knowing how terrorism emerges seems more likely to empower life-saving security responses. His book is densely supplied with excellent examples of “how” plots evolve from contemplation through execution, offering some startling insights into a potpourri of banal pragmatics (what do I say when I want to rent a farm to practice blowing things up?) and elaborate logistics (how many months of surveillance will prepare us to plant the photo-electric cell such that only the target’s car triggers it?) that characterize past attacks. He strongly emphasizes that the search for a terrorist profile or inner mental risk factors is fruitless, whereas the search for the behaviors associated with terrorism is promising: “identifying the behaviors associated with . . . becoming involved, ‘being’... involved, and engaging in terrorist events and disengaging.” (p 159) This focus verges on the Skinnerian objection to psychodynamics: it is to never mind where the box came from (and never mind about the gears in the box), just look at what goes in and pops out—which Horgan calls “the behaviors themselves and the ways in which they develop.” I am a little more open to the possible value of “why” research. It’s clearly useful to know that an internal combustion engine turns gas into rotary motion, but it might be equally useful to know why such engine exists: the human eagerness for superhuman power.

On occasion, Horgan detours into disciplinary over-reckoning. Only an academic psychologist (or Federal prosecutor) would state, “a clear answer to the question of what it means to *be involved* in terrorism is perhaps one of the most important research questions since 2001” (p. 104). That is not a research question. No yardstick, clinical trial, or mathematical formula will answer it. It is a semantic—or, as Horgan correctly

says, “definitional”—issue that will be argued long after the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

Perhaps paradoxically, one of the most courageous and insightful contributions of this excellent text is to point out our failures as a scholarly community. One such failure is the sorry dearth of high quality data—combined with both our failure to share data (often due to academic competition or restrictions on government-based research grants) and our failure to understand what the data reveal about the “how” of terrorism.

Even more importantly, in his last chapter Horgan finally tackles the elephant in the room: the psychology of counterterrorism. The author boldly proposes that we can no longer shy away from analyzing how many counterterrorists have interfered with, rather than advanced, the very cause they claim to champion. Never mind the assumedly rational design of counterterrorism policy or initiatives based on falsifiable theory. We are not even accomplishing trial-and-error, thus policy choices are not informed by deep study of costs versus benefits of what we do (for instance, targeted killing). Do we know how many people have turned to militant jihad because of drones? Without having made a serious effort to answer such a question, buzzing around Yemen in crop-dusters with Hellfires is a foolhardy invitation to blowback.

Why do we continue to act in a vacuum of outcomes-based research? A psychological examination of involvement in counterterrorism exposes the embarrassing gaffes of both practitioners and scholars. First, we face a gargantuan structural issue: leaders, policymakers, politicians, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agencies are responsible for counterterrorism. Absent solid knowledge, and subject to political whims, they may be dubiously qualified to select the best counterterrorism approach, and are often compromised by pursuit of personal agendas. Compare this with the way we fight cancer, where doctors and researchers collaborate extensively, and information derived from clinical trials are shared widely. Surely, a complex, life threatening world problem like terrorism deserves a post-enlightenment approach involving unbiased study of what works and what doesn't. The prioritization of counterterrorism initiatives should at least be influence by those who employ evidence-based and outcomes-based approaches. Yet, despite a lot of research funding and a lot of communication between researchers and policymakers, the policymakers tend to nod and shake hands with the experts—and then follow their gut instincts.

Second, academics are hardly immune from bias. Scholars of terrorism (myself included) believe in their hearts that the world would be safer if only leaders followed their advice. Maybe one of them is right, but the very idea is presumptuous given the pitiable paucity of outcomes-based research.

The bottom line: no one knows how to do counterterrorism better because (a) the right research has not been done and (b) even if unbiased scholars figured out what seems to work, practitioners—disabled by cognitive bias and personal agendas—may not listen. Horgan admits that this might seem depressing, but his candor is uplifting. It's high time to expose and overcome the structural, political, and psychological underpinnings of our continued homeland insecurity. Ultimately, the conclusion of this excellent book is a dignified call for new thinking on terrorism and how to counter it with increasing sophistication and success.

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