

Tom Parker. *Avoiding the Terrorist Trap: Why Respect for Human Rights is the Key to Defeating Terrorism.*

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Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

Terrorism is ‘hard’ and human rights are ‘soft’ in the perception of many people. The subtitle of Tom Parker’s book, implying that the soft power of acting within the confines of a human rights framework can defeat terrorism is therefore intriguing. Who is the author of this book who tries to convince us to put human rights at the heart of counter-terrorism? An idealist with his head in the clouds and far removed from the realities on the ground in places like Iraq? Nothing could be further from the truth. Tom Parker has an intelligence background and has worked for both the British MI5 and for the US section of Amnesty International. As an advisor, he has worked in more than half a dozen war zones as well as in New York where he co-authored the UN Secretary-General’s “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.” Parker has academic credentials too, from the London School of Economics and from Leiden University, but has also survived two bomb attacks in London and Baghdad. This book, which has been in the making for many years, reflects the author’s rich personal experience which lends weight to his arguments. In more than 800 pages, the author explains why holding the moral high ground in the fight against terrorism is not a luxury few governments under siege can afford but actually something that makes eminent sense.

One of Parker’s central contentions is “that terrorism is an essentially contingent political tactic – any success depends in large part on the manner in which the target state chooses to respond to terrorist activity’ (p.28). Under President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney the US government embraced after 9/11 what the Vice President termed ‘the dark side’ which led, among other human rights violations, to the torture practices in Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Seeking to provoke an over-reaction is, according to Tom Parker’s reading of terrorist strategy papers, one of the six core concepts underlying the use of violence by terrorist groups – the other five being asymmetrical warfare, waging a war of attrition, propaganda by deed, charismatic leadership (the construction of revolutionary prototypes and martyrs), and building legitimacy (p.28 and 203).

Part I (pp. 33-205) of the book looks at terrorism from the perspectives of its practitioners, exploring the strategies and tactics behind the ‘philosophy of the bomb’. Having extracted the essence from studying the terrorist playbooks, one of Parker’s conclusions is – and it applies especially to democracies - that ‘The genius of terrorism is that it turns us into our own worst enemies’ (p.142). Part II (pp 206-458) looks at what the social sciences have found out about violent extremism. Like in the first part, where he combed out the strategic thinking of terrorists and their intellectual godfathers, Parker scans the by now very large academic literature on terrorism, summarising what he finds useful to make his case. He finds that indiscriminate state repression e.g. in the form of police brutality, tends to inflame feelings of rage and calls for revenge, thereby greatly facilitating terrorist recruitment. One of the most solid findings from big-data quantitative studies on terrorism that Parker surveyed is that “while poverty did not correlate in absolute terms to an increase in terrorism, human rights abuses and the suppression of civil liberties did” (p.451). Heavy-handed coercive actions by state actors are, however, not the only radicalizing factor Parker found in the academic literature. Other push factors that can radicalise people and turn some of them into terrorists are “selective empathy for those suffering, the quest for self-actualization, supportive like-minded social networks, grievances with at least some social legitimacy [and] a sense of social or political exclusion” (p.456).

In Part III (pp.459-768) the author explores the ineffectual ways many governments have reacted to the challenge of non-state terrorism. He shows that again and again democratic governments have fallen into the terrorist trap as if they had learned nothing from the past. “States would be wise to respect human rights precisely because terrorist groups want states to abuse them”, Parker concludes (p.761), after citing statements of terrorist insiders pointing in this direction. The author’s survey of what went wrong in past counter-terrorist campaigns and his practical experience gained in present ones combine to make this an powerful book. After reading it, even a sceptical reader might be more inclined to support his conclusion that “Placing human rights at the

center of the state's counter-terrorist response is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do as well" (p.767).

Coming from a CT practitioner who is also a scholar, Tom Parker's volume carries an authority that few other works in the field of (counter-) terrorism studies possess. Its length should not deter readers for the book is well written, with fascinating historical and contemporary details spicing his account.

About the Reviewer: Alex P. Schmid is Editor-in-Chief of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'.