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The Irrational Terrorist and Other Persistent Terrorism Myths

Darren Hudson, Arie Perliger,
Riley Post, and Zachary Hohman

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Darren Hudson,
Arie Perliger, Riley Post,
Zachary Hohman



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

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1

What We Think We Know About Terrorism

The United States, and indeed the whole world, had its attention focused on terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Terrorism likely only casually populated most minds prior to that date, despite the fact that as a social phenomenon it is as old as organized government. One of the most notorious and earliest organized terrorist groups was the Jewish Sicarii, which operated in Palestine against Roman occupiers in the first century AD. Others, such as the Assassins of Syria or the Thuggee of India, operated in the eleventh century. But the term *terrorism* is more modern and associated with the Reign of Terror that followed the 1789 French Revolution.

In relation to subjects such as chemistry, biology, or even economics, the field of terrorism studies is relatively young, beginning in earnest only in the 1960s with the rise of left-wing terrorist activities. Despite some important efforts by historians and political scientists, who mostly applied qualitative methods, at least some of the early efforts at understanding terrorism were riddled with erroneous assumptions and lack of data. Unfortunately, as in business and other realms of human endeavors, first movers usually set the tone of discussion, and those erroneous assumptions have perpetuated themselves in the form of persistent, pernicious myths. In terms of modern terrorism, for example, analysts and pundits initially suggested that the “religious wave” of terrorism in which we currently find ourselves somehow differs fundamentally from previous manifestations of

terrorism because the motives behind the new terrorism appear religious and not political in nature. At the same time, terrorism appeared to spring from poor, uneducated areas of the world, leading to an assumption that economic/social grievances served as one root cause of terrorism by providing a wedge issue that religious groups were using to create a desire for social change. Both of these assumptions, as we shall discuss, are at best misleading and not supported by data.

As we discussed terrorism with friends and colleagues, we noticed that such misconceptions were generally coloring the public's views, which generally influenced what they saw as acceptable and appropriate responses. And because in most countries public perceptions and preferences impact public policy at some level, many of the myths about terrorism resulted in ineffective counterterrorism policies. For example, the belief that poverty undergirds modern terrorism has led to billions (perhaps trillions) of aid, development, and research funding aimed at poverty alleviation in a vain attempt to reduce terrorism. Thus, we felt it was time to address these myths head-on using the accumulated scientific literature as a backdrop, but in a way that any interested reader could easily access.

It is easy to understand why some of these myths persist through time. They fit our preconceptions or preferences. For example, imagining a logic or even rationality in the mass and/or indiscriminate murder of people can be incredibly difficult. If one watches or reads almost any public discourse on terrorism since 9/11, the term *crazy* is invariably invoked to suggest that terrorists are irrational people who blindly strike out against anyone in their path. After all, who in their right mind would murder for no apparent reason other than hate? But, as we will show in this book, that simply is not true. We are not asserting that terrorists are morally correct—far from it. Rather, we show that they do not fit the classical definitions of mental illness and instead exhibit rational behavior, given their objectives, both psychologically and economically.

Of course, all persistent generalizations contain grains of truth. But like many generalizations, these have taken on the status of myth with Jungian archetypes. That is, terrorism is cast in terms of “good” versus “evil” in a primal, innate way that prevents a deeper understanding of underlying causes. This analysis by no means excuses the choices made by terrorists or justifies their existence. Rather, breaking down root causes helps us target them for more effective counterterrorism that will give the “blood and treasure” devoted to it the highest effective return. We use modern psychology, economics, business, and political science to filter this mythology and see what stands up to scrutiny and what does not.

In this vein, we aim in writing this book to tackle some of the more persistent but pernicious myths about terrorism that are in fact impeding our development of adequate and successful counterterrorism policies. Our goal here is not to plow new theoretical ground but to fill the gap between the theoretical and empirical academic literature and the broader public literature in a way that is accessible. The writing is extensively sourced so that interested readers can further delve into the scientific literature as desired. Appendices and text boxes add a bit more context and analytical detail for those interested, but we hope that the writing itself provides a useful passage through the literature without being too burdened with jargon and the granular aspects of theoretical arguments.

Our journey begins, of course, with some basic background in Chapter 2. There is a misconception that we lack a comprehensive means to even define terrorism in the first place. Despite the debates in the scientific literature, we do at least have a consensus working definition that terrorism is “political violence.” Definitions are important because they guide how political leaders respond when an event occurs, so we spend a bit of time addressing the base definitions. Some historical perspective also adds context to how and why we define terrorism.

The remaining chapters address some of the critical myths and issues related to terrorism. In Chapter 3 we tackle the elephant in the room that is always front and center in modern terrorism: religious fundamentalism. We talk about the role that religion plays—and does not play. Religion can serve as a fertile recruiting mechanism with its highly socialized structure and built-in motivations for behavior. But this sort of “cultural approach” to understanding terrorism ignores the most important aspect of the phenomenon: at its core, terrorism is a political activity. Understanding this distinction allows us to proceed to a better understanding of other critical misconceptions about terrorism. Because, at a base level, if we firmly believe that only religion causes people to act, dismissing other observable motivating factors becomes easy.

Chapter 4 examines the role of poverty and relative economic deprivation in terrorism. Despite the ease of envisioning the poor, hungry, and uneducated as highly motivated to change their circumstances and thus prime recruits for terrorism, the evidence just does not support this belief. And because it persists, we misdirect money and manpower. Chapter 5 addresses the impact of mental illness. Are terrorists irrational? Are they “crazy”? Again, we take on this myth directly. The belief that terrorists are irrational is comforting because then we can easily dismiss their behavior as anomalous. Unfortunately, the reality is not quite that simple.

Television punditry often greatly misrepresents the complexity of terrorist organizations, always positing one of two scenarios: complex interwoven cells spread across the world tightly coordinated by a terrorist leader from a cave in Afghanistan or rudimentary “lone wolf” actors blowing themselves up in crowded popular places. While both versions are partially accurate in some circumstances, these simplifications miss very important elements of organizational design and evolution that help us understand how we might better combat terrorist groups in the most effective ways. We address these issues in Chapter 6 by comparing terrorist groups and analyzing the role of networks and economics in organizational design. Chapter 7 focuses attention on the role of risk and media in shaping the public’s view of terrorism. Here, we take on the very sensitive topic of how terrorists *and* governments can manipulate public response based on our innate reactions to and preferences for risk. We hope that an examination of how our personal preferences are used against us will make readers more discerning about information and arguments offered for actions and in managing their own reactions to terrorism itself.

A primary reason for tackling this subject is to better inform the public about terrorism and how that relates to effective counterterrorism policy. Chapter 8 therefore takes on some critical counterterrorism myths that are limiting the public’s view of policy efficacy and the best path forward for addressing terrorism in the future. We wrap it all up in Chapter 9.

This book presumes neither that you know everything about terrorism nor that you know nothing. In some cases, we may uncomfortably challenge your preconceptions. We have no underlying agenda. Everything we discuss is fully supported (and documented) by the academic/scientific literature. We approach this issue dispassionately because we believe that having a clear-eyed view of what terrorism is and is not offers the best way to move forward in addressing it. And we do not claim that this is the end of the discussion. There is much to learn and much ongoing research. But at this juncture, we believe it is time to clear some of these myths from the common vernacular so that the understanding of terrorism and demands for counterterrorism policy stand more soundly on facts and not misconceptions.