Review Essay: Terrorism and Insurgency

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The war on terrorism will have lasted seven years by September 2008, making it much longer than the American Civil War or World War II. Current American national security and military strategy documents, in fact, frame this war as a protracted struggle, one which may see persistent conflict lasting several decades. Despite the duration of this war, the US government has not yet exhibited a great deal of perspicacity in identifying and describing it coherently. It has used monikers that vary from the "Global War on Terrorism" to the "Long War" and "Persistent Conflict." These labels may well capture a portion of the enemy's methodology, or the longevity of the fight, but they do not provide for a clear understanding of what kind of war America and its partners are prosecuting. Is it a war, or a struggle, against terrorism? Or is it a war aimed at countering an insurgency of global scale in which nonstate, armed groups coalesce and affiliate under the aegis of a radical interpretative religious ideology, with the stated aim of overthrowing the Westphalian State system? In the latter sense, does al Qaeda foment no less than a revolution in revolution? The vast collection of essays contained in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* attempts to answer these questions as well as many others. Herein lies the value of this multivolume edited work, as it provides a comprehensive examination of a host of issues and challenges that continue to make this perennial and irregular war an exceedingly challenging one.

James Forest is certainly qualified to edit such a massive undertaking. He is the Director of Terrorism Studies at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he teaches courses on counterterrorism and information warfare. In this capacity, he also directs research initiatives for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. In just over 2,000 pages, comprising three volumes, Forest has compiled 60-odd thematic essays that outline perspectives on insurgency, terrorism, strategy, intelligence, interagency cooperation, democratization, ideology, and martyrdom. This aggregation of essays summarizes and distills extant knowledge with the aim of understanding and learning more regarding terrorism and insurgencies; and how to better counter them. Portions of this work explore best practices in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, while other chapters examine failed methodologies. The first volume, "Strategic and Tactical Considerations," analyzes hard power, soft power, and intelligence, as well as counterintelligence. The second volume, "Sources and Facilitators," examines state failure, border security, democratization, network organiza-

tions, criminal connections, and root-cause societal factors. The last volume, "Lessons Learned from Combating Terrorism and Insurgency," explores myriad historical case studies on counterterrorism operations, ranging from Beirut to Beslan.

Forest provides a thorough preface and introductory chapter at the beginning of the first volume that defines the scope, purpose, and framework organizing this collection of essays. Fighting insurgents and terrorists requires a variety of strategies and techniques. The editor also notes at the outset that "insurgents can and do use terrorism, but insurgents are but one type of violent nonstate actor who may choose to use terrorism." In other words, while many insurgents employ terrorist tactics (suicide bombing, for example), not all terrorists are insurgents, per se. The most insightful and consequential observation in the introduction, however, is Forest's explanation of why religious ideologies present a particularly challenging objective to overcome. First, ideologies based on interpretations or distortions of religion are founded on theological supremacy; believers presume superiority over nonbelievers, who are not illumined by the true faith. Second, these ideologies are based on exclusivity wherein the "true believers" occupy some holy territory and are a chosen people. Third, many, if not most, religious ideologies are absolutist in that they do not tolerate half-heartedness; one is absolutely with the cause and faith, or not. Finally, only true believers can count on some notion of salvation in the afterlife, whereas the nonbelieving, or unbelieving, enemies of the cause will ostensibly only meet death and eternal damnation. In the case of the dogma that al Qaeda and its ilk espouse, their version of "Islam or death" is the mantra. Such "ideologies" present fictional yet "polarizing values in terms of right and wrong, good and evil, light and dark—values that can be co-opted by terrorist organizations to convert a seeker into a lethal killer." Based on this insight, Forest observes that defeating al Qaeda is largely about the war within Islam over ideas and souls.

Among the authors in the first volume are Maha Azzam-Nusseibeh, Douglas A. Borer, James Kiras, Steven Marks, Harvey Rishikof, and James Robbins. They offer analyses on topics as diverse as democracy, ideology, the law, man-hunting, and suicide bombing, as they pertain to defeating an insurgency that is founded on an interpretive Islamist ideology. In one informative chapter, Borer and Michael Freeman examine strategic thinking and the utility of promoting democracy to defeat terrorism. Their argument that democratization is probably not an effective counter to terrorism is fourfold: Democratization will not undermine the fundamental causes of terrorism; the proliferation of democracies will create more targets for terrorists; democratization will weaken the response of states; and a world with more democracies might produce fewer allies willing to fight terrorism. The underlying assumption supporting this argument is that making more democracies in the Middle East would require coercive regime change and military occupation, as exemplified in Iraq and Afghanistan. The authors' rationale is that the presence and occupation by more than 100,000 forces, in the heartland of Islam, in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, for example, would be counterproductive in the fight against radical Islamists as such an action would precipitate more recruitment of al Qaeda-supporting mujahideen. Borer and Freeman also postulate that for America and the West in general, "engaging in the war of ideas within the Islamic world is an undertaking far more complicated than many people appreciate for

many reasons." The West does not have the credibility or authority in the Islamic community to participate even indirectly in Islamic issues. Another reason why western participation is impractical is that other groups that are much better poised to wage the war of ideas within Islam have also failed. For example, extant Islamic state governments (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc.) have all tried in varying degrees to counter or suppress radical Islamists, achieving limited success thus far.

The religious ideology that animates and resonates with those who orchestrate and execute insurgency and terrorist suicide bombings is what constitutes the essence and the glue that binds these movements. Two other chapters in the first volume—"Battlefronts in the War of Ideas" by Jim Robbins and "The Centrality of Ideology in Counterterrorism Strategies in the Middle East" by Maha Azzam-Nusseibeh—complement the analysis by Borer and Freeman. Robbins submits that religiously animated insurgent and terrorist groups operate in many ways like similar groups. Within contemporary Islamist movements religion is instrumentalized as ideology, serving the same purpose as other more familiar secular frameworks, such as Marxism or nationalism. The role of religion as ideology is to propagate, recruit, organize, train, and aspire to operational goals. Like any other revolutionary dogma, radical Islamism is not just a "description of the world or justification for specific attacks but a self-sanctifying program of action that helps recruit, motivate, mobilize, and direct the activities of the group." It is the principal lens through which the insurgency communicates its program to the outside world, through violent acts or information operations. More than anything else, ideology aims to legitimize the struggle in the minds of the movement and the world audience. The radicals who wage war against civilization do not include all those who espouse "salafist" beliefs or proclivities, only those who seek to impose these beliefs on others through the barrel of a gun. Therefore, Robbins postulates, countering this ideology should not encompass a broad campaign aimed at every aspect of their belief. A more efficient approach would focus on junctures and critical nodes within this ideological schema that are utilized to "transform faith into threat." The most crucial ideological nexus may be found in their goal to establish a link between Islam and violence, in an attempt to employ the former to legitimize the latter.

Azzam-Nusseibeh amplifies the centrality of ideology in the Middle East by generally comparing the origins and evolution of radical Islamist ideology in two crucial states from whence the movement emanated: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. His chapter briefly addresses the principal issue that underpins the ideology fueling terrorism and insurgency. This igniter, he explains, is the fact that radical Islamist terrorism has emerged due to "the confluence of a new revolutionary theory combined with widespread public disaffection toward the state." The West does not have the credibility or credentials to seriously influence the ideological battle within Islam. From a theological standpoint, the principal protagonist that should wage the war of ideas against radical Islamists is the region's traditional and orthodox Islamic hierarchy. The fact that the traditional Islamic establishments in Egypt and Saudi Arabia are opposed to radical Islamism, as engendered by the likes of al Qaeda, does not imply that these establishments disagree entirely, or necessarily, with the worldview of the radicals. Both Islamist extremists and the traditional Islamic clerics reflect the

worldview and aspirations of the societies from which they hail. Areas of consensus among radical and orthodox Islam appear to be the need for political reform, the desire for a greater degree of Islamization, and a demand for a stronger stance in opposition to Israel and the United States. In other words, the war for Muslim minds and ideas that Egypt and Saudi Arabia need to wage is not about moving the region closer to western interests or principles. Essentially, it is about discrediting the Islamists as a means of mitigating and ultimately eliminating their appeal among the indigenous populations in the region. "Ultimately, the defeat of terrorism must involve the winning of the hearts and minds of the religious many in Middle Eastern society, and not the secular few." According to the author, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been particularly successful in countering the radical Islamists' efforts to legitimize the use of terror. The irony is, the success of orthodoxy in countering Islamic fundamentalism has accelerated Islamization of societies in the region, which may also be inimical, if not violently so, to American interests.

The second volume, "Sources and Facilitators," generally covers state failure, border controls, democracy promotion, networks, trafficking, and societal issues. Bard O'Neill, Donald Alberts, Thomas H. Johnson, and M. Chris Mason are among its authors. In the chapter titled "Terrorism, Insurgency, and Afghanistan," the reader will find the most cogent and topical contribution of the entire set. Johnson and Mason lucidly argue that "Afghanistan today is in danger of capsizing in a perfect storm of insurgency, terrorism, narcotics, and warlords." The linkages between these challenges are expanding and self-reinforcing. The resurgent al Qaeda-backed Taliban are fomenting an increasingly potent insurgency in the south and east of Afghanistan. The principal sources of this insurgency include corruption, oppression, poverty, bad governance, and Islamist movements that are metastasizing throughout Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. The post-Taliban Karzai government has found it exceedingly difficult to extend its mandate and control outside the capital of Kabul and into Afghanistan's vast and austere hinterlands. The most pernicious aspect, and a crucial cause for the steady regeneration and growth in insurgent capacity, the authors explain, is that Osama bin Laden, most of the high-ranking al Qaeda leadership, and a preponderance of the Taliban senior cadre have been afforded relatively unimpeded sanctuary in and around the Federally Administered Tribal Areas across the border in Pakistan. Johnson and Mason maintain that this grave situation evolved, in part, as a result of the US government decision in mid-November 2001, during the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom, to allow the Pakistani Air Force to transport hundreds of Pakistanis from the then-encircled northern city of Konduz. This evacuation "turned into a mass extraction of senior Taliban and al Qaeda personnel, dubbed Operation Evil Airlift" by appalled Special Forces soldiers on the scene. The following month the United States failed to commit American ground forces to block the escape route of al Qaeda from Tora Bora, allowing bin Laden and several dozen of his senior leaders to escape a potential encirclement, fleeing into Pakistan, where they remain. No counterinsurgency has ever succeeded by affording the insurgents cross-border sanctuary. This film has played before, in Vietnam, Cambodia, and with the Soviets in the same nether regions of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. None of these ended well. The wild and unregulated tribal ar-

eas on Pakistan's northern border remain an increasingly grave impediment to any chance of success in Afghanistan. The consequences of failure, however, are graver still.

Volume 3, "Lessons Learned from Combating Terrorism and Insurgency," includes a host of case studies on counterterrorism operations dating back to the 1980s. Jim Robbins, Tom Sherlock, and Rick Wrona are among the authors who offer the most illuminating chapters. Robbins and Sherlock analyze the wars in Chechnya, and Wrona offers a chapter on Hezbollah, a typically understated but genuinely perfidious and formidable terrorist organization with state sponsorship and global reach.

In the aggregate, this multivolume set does indeed contribute to the corpus of knowledge that informs how we counter terrorism and insurgency in the twenty-first century. The majority of the essays are well-researched, well-written, and germane. One can find more than a few insights on what this war is about, the enemy's ideology and networks, and what needs to be done to effectively prosecute this long, irregular, and Manichean struggle. Plowing through all three volumes and 2,000-plus pages of this edited work does require more resilience than the typical reader should be expected to exhibit if one is to get "the most juice for the squeeze." This reviewer recommends the three volumes for the reference shelves in academic institutions, or for institutions that have security or policy as their purview. I do not, though, recommend these books for personal reading enjoyment. If it were possible to purchase or acquire individual volumes from the set, the quality of each volume coincides numerically; the first being the best and most salient. Volume 1 answers questions, raises questions, and generally stimulates thought on how to frame this war. Volume 2 is a close second in quality and includes the single best and most relevant essay of the entire work—"Terrorism, Insurgency, and Afghanistan" by Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason.

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