

# *Counterterrorism*

by Ronald Crelinsten, Polity, 2009, 301 pp.

## Tim Stevens

Since the end of the Cold War, academics have turned from convoluted iterations of deterrence theory and strategic posture to considerations of the complex security environment engendered by globalisation and multi-polarity, a world populated by a bewildering range of actors and threats. Since the early 1990s this literature has been further swelled by work concerned with the nature of terrorism and, after 9/11 particularly, what can be done about it. Ronald Crelinsten's *Counterterrorism*, the first in Polity's new series, 'Understanding Terrorism,' takes a significant step towards redressing any suspicions that the terrorism industry has merely found a new outlet for expansion and remuneration. His well-measured, original, and humane approach to the theory and practice of counterterrorism is a welcome addition to the academic literature. It addresses the tensions between liberal democracy and counterterrorism and, as such, is in the tradition of scholars such as Paul Wilkinson, to whom Crelinsten acknowledges an intellectual debt, and Seumas Miller. Those tensions are also, of course, at the heart of public concerns over heavy-handed counterterrorism practice, an issue of which all states are aware, even if their pronouncements and actions often belie it.

Crelinsten challenges the notion that 'everything changed on 9/11,' at least as far as the nature of terrorism goes. This is not the same as suggesting that 'nothing changed,' but what principally altered was the discourse, a thesis examined convincingly and in depth by Richard Jackson in *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester, 2005). In this environment, we were now fighting a 'new war,' against a 'new' enemy, and therefore 'new' responses were required. What 'new' meant in this context is clear: the suspension of democratic civil liberties at the whim of states caught up in a new discursive paradigm, in which every social issue is increasingly viewed through the lens of securitisation. This 'September 12 thinking' privileges counterterrorism as a military activity at the expense of law enforcement and positive social policy, and challenges deeply entrenched notions of 'democracy' and 'liberty.' Crelinsten argues that effective counterterrorism must move beyond the polarised 'us/them' discourse of the global 'war on terror.' To that end, he devotes one chapter each to five types of counterterrorism – coercive (the assertion of states' monopoly of violence), proactive (the prevention of terrorist

acts), persuasive (propaganda and communication), defensive (risk management and attack mitigation), and long-term (strategic structural analysis). Each has its own benefits and drawbacks but none, Crelinsten contends, is alone sufficient to address terrorism issues, as they arise singly or collectively.

The final chapter is devoted to drawing together the strands from each of these analytical types to provide the bones of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, the *raison d'être* of Crelinsten's endeavour. He presents his framework in a series of four tables displaying graph ordered dialectic pairs in four quadrants. For example, his first table addressing 'prevention and counterterrorism' plots suggested measures on a graph of space/time against offensive/defensive. In the offensive/time category we therefore find 'international legal regimes' and 'intelligence sharing and cooperation.' By contrast, the defensive/space category includes 'target hardening' and 'emergency preparedness.' Each of the three remaining binary pairs – criminal justice model/war model, economy/politics, coercive/persuasive – is similarly plotted against space/time. The value of this approach is its clarity, and its visual nature means that planners of counterstrategies need to ensure that all sixteen of the quadrants Crelinsten proposes must be addressed and balanced in order to provide a 'comprehensive' counterterrorism approach mindful of democracy and human rights. It will also appeal to practitioners and policymakers for whom a structuralist prospectus will be far more attractive than convoluted strategies arising from meditations on postmodern terrorism, even if the emergence of the latter is a reality, as Walter Laqueur and others suggest.

Several sections of Crelinsten's analysis are particularly worthy of note. His examination of the role of intelligence in proactive counterterrorism is both subtle and eye-opening. As regards both its generation and its use, he explains its inherent complexities and shortcomings, difficulties in targeting decisions, institutional accountability, and the headaches of surveillance. This is not just in relation to dodgy dossiers or WMD claims but to domestic dilemmas derived from real threats of 'home-grown terrorism,' and the political blowback caused by privileging political expediency over human rights. He is also strong on the communicative functions of counterterrorism, which are gaining more attention as the US in particular renews its focus on both foreign and domestic public diplomacy.

One criticism of Crelinsten's book, and others in this field, is that the current wave of Islamist violence is best characterised as a global insurgency. Folding insurgency into terrorism might actually be the wrong way to address the contemporary

situation. Terrorism remains a tactic, albeit an instrumental and powerful one; insurgency is political and therefore strategic. If we adopt this viewpoint, it is terrorism that is part of insurgency, and not the other way around. Therefore, any counter-measures that privilege terror tactics at the expense of insurgent aims will always fail. To his credit, Crelinsten implicitly understands this, and might respond to this quibble by rightly saying that he is not addressing just Islamist violence. He also includes counterinsurgency practices in his consideration of 'hard power.' The concern is that, whilst practitioners of 'counterterrorism' remark often that they are conducting counterinsurgency, little consideration of this has yet appeared in the terrorism literature. One wonders if a comprehensive approach to the problem can ever be achieved while this disparity continues.

The success of any strategy is, of course, in its execution, so it is too early to tell if Crelinsten's recommendations will be adopted by policymakers and practitioners, let alone prove effective. However, what emerges from his fine-grained and astute analysis is a sober and common-sense assessment of ways forward in a complex world. This eschews a reductionist and reactive mindset in favour of a progressive and inclusive strategy that, with the understanding and consent of all stakeholders, holds forth prospects for a global consensus in tackling very real security threats in the 21st century. Crelinsten offers a wide range of available options; contingent upon real understanding of the threats faced, and moves the counterterrorism debate beyond worldviews dependent on ideological and political fossilisation post-9/11. It is not alone in this field, as Boaz Ganor's *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers* (Transaction, 2005) attests, although Ganor's book is geared to the Israeli situation and is less accessible generally. As such, *Counterterrorism* is likely to appeal to a wider audience of students, researchers, practitioners and policymakers and deserves global readership. In the context of recent findings by the International Commission of Jurists regarding counterterrorism measures and the degradation of due legal process and human rights, as well as a new US administration looking towards multilateral international engagement, Crelinsten's book is a timely addition to the literature on the complexities of counterterrorism in liberal democracies, as well as a roadmap to their potential solutions.

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