

Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts

Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O’Leary and John Tirman (eds.), University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, Viii + 499 pp.

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Also under review: *Understanding Global Terror*, by Christopher Ankersen (ed.) Polity, 2007, 244 pp.

The ongoing explosion of books on terrorism and the global war on terror simultaneously adds to our understanding of the subject and reveals just how muddled much of our thinking is. The key terms: terror and the global war on terror – are themselves treated in a variety of ways and have become almost emptied of meaningful content.

The editor of the *Understanding Global Terror* volume, Christopher Ankersen, rightly notes that ‘terrorism has developed such a polysemic quality that it runs the danger of becoming an “analytical hat stand,” where anyone can use it to mean anything, therefore rendering it meaningless.’ (p. 2) Three cheers for that statement! Perhaps we should impose a voluntary moratorium on the use of the word, in an effort to figure out just what it is that we are all so preoccupied with. It is a shame that the contributors to this volume did not take this comment more seriously and question the very nature of a postulated ‘global war on terror,’ and the claim that we are now living in an age of global terror. A deflation of rhetoric is sorely needed.

In the preface Philip Bobbitt asks whether at the most profound conceptual level we understand what the global war on terror is all about. He argues that because we don’t understand what we are doing, we are not winning this war. One does not have to accept in its entirety Bobbitt’s answer to this question to agree that he has posed the right question.

Taking up the challenge, several of the contributors have important and interesting things to say about the global war on terror. Other chapters are simply a summary of findings that are now well established. In short, this is a useful addition to the burgeoning literature on the global war on terror, neither better nor worse than its competitors. Despite a promising start, and the occasional expression of scepticism

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or doubt, the claim that ‘international terrorism and the ‘war’ against it are the leitmotif of our times’ (p. 1) deserves more careful and sustained consideration than it gets in many of the contributions to this volume. There are many sources of this rush to assert that we are now living in a new age of global terror: some are the political agendas of state actors and religious extremists, others are simply muddled (or ideological) thinking on the part of the pundit class. Academics can usefully reset (or at least attempt to) the terms of debate; they should be wary of simply taking them as given.

The best essay in this volume is Lawrence Freedman’s concluding chapter, which is rightly skeptical about the standard ways in which the ‘global war on terror’ has been treated. He ends by arguing that ‘we need to liberate ourselves from the preoccupation with terrorism. It cannot be the filter through which we view the totality of our foreign policy.’ (p. 228) Freedman is right, of course. But it is a measure of extent to which we have become obsessed with the topic that it needs to be said at all.

The Heiber, O’Leary and Tirman volume on *Terror, Insurgency, and the State* is really about insurgency. It is an ambitious attempt at a systematic comparison of eleven recent insurgencies, with the aim of find out what sorts of policies work to defuse insurgencies, and which do not.

The case studies presented in this volume are generally very well done. The authors were chosen because they had detailed, on the ground knowledge of the insurgencies. Many have done anthropological field work in those societies. Moreover, the authors have collaborated to an unusual degree, and the chapters systematically address the same issues. The editors have clearly made a major effort to focus the efforts of the group. That said, the reader will learn more about some cases (Northern Ireland, Colombia and Peru for example) than others. This reflects both the state of existing research (which is much more detailed on Northern Ireland, for example, than on other cases) and the consequent richness or poverty of available information, and also the ability of the authors to provide an objective and theoretically sophisticated analysis.

The editors see their book as, in part, a response to recent arguments by Collier and his collaborators that modern insurgencies are often fuelled by rents from easily controllable exports, such as diamonds and drugs, and that they are motivated as much (or more) by greed as grievance. In the cases discussed in this book, the

evidence generally runs against the Collier hypothesis. Many of the cases discussed in this volume are insurgencies arising from the aspirations of minorities to reorganise the states in which they find themselves, either through separatism or through a renegotiation of the terms of citizenship. They are able to operate with relatively exiguous sources of funding, and there is little evidence of the leadership or the rank-and-file being motivated largely by concerns to amass wealth. The editors suggest that Collier's results come from reliance on a sample of insurgencies drawn disproportionately from Africa. The sample in this volume is drawn more from Latin America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and not surprisingly, the results tend to be different. Comparative historical analyses of insurgencies are, of course, bedevilled by the small-N problem: the need for great detail in these complex phenomena means that the systematic comparison of cases is a formidable challenge. The editors have made Herculean efforts to address this issue, but there is only so much one can do with eleven cases. One of the conclusions that jumps out at the reader of a volume such as this is the great range and variety of insurgencies, and the need to develop a theory that does not fit them all into a single, Procrustean bed.

The central concern of the volume is in identifying those state policies which set in motion a process of winding down of the insurgency. The authors and editors have a lot of very sensible things to say, mostly cantered on the need to bring the insurgents into the mainstream of the political process so that the moderating effects of electoral competition can start to operate. Particularly in the cases where insurgency is fuelled by a sense of ethnic or sectarian identity, they recommend consociational rather than simple majoritarian democracy.

They note that, on both the state and on the insurgent side, hardliners are often in a position to act as 'spoilers' of the efforts by moderates to reach a negotiated compromise. It would have been nice to have had a more in-depth discussion of this issue, treating it perhaps as a set of interacting, 'nested' games between insurgents and the state, and within each camp, between hardliners and moderates.

One of the persistent themes of the book is that when states label insurgents as terrorists, vow not to negotiate with them, and endorse policies entailing draconian repression, they usually set in motion a spiral of violence and counter mobilisation that fuels the insurgency. Treating the insurgents as terrorists who have no legitimate grievances generally doesn't work. What does work are efforts to bring them into the mainstream of the political process. Under the appropriate circumstances,

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this will subject them to the logic of electoral moderation. To the extent that the insurgent organisations depend on a mass popular base, and to the extent that their demands can be channelled into routine democratic politics, the chances that they will exchange the gun for the ballot box are enhanced. Talking about ‘terrorism’ generates a labelling process that is counterproductive.

One wonders, then, why the word ‘terror’ appears in the title of the book. Substantively, it is a book about insurgency; whether or not the insurgents or the state use methods that can reasonably be described as ‘terrorist’ is hardly a central issue. According to the editors, terrorists are those who deliberately target non-combatants. This is a fair enough definition, but it is a wide one: there are very few wars which have not targeted non-combatants in one way or another. To believe otherwise is to accept an idealised view of war. If we accept the editors’ definition of terrorism, then it is rarely absent from armed conflict, and as such is of little analytical interest in itself. What is interesting about insurgencies and counterinsurgencies is not the application of ‘terrorist’ methods, but the challenge to the state and the ability of the state to defuse or suppress that challenge.

The conclusions that the editors come to is that the insurgencies analysed in this volume began before the promulgation of the ‘global war on terror,’ and that their dynamics have remarkably little to do with either the global war on terror or indeed with terrorism as such. It is therefore something of a puzzle and a disappointment to discover that it is hard to get publishers and readers to pay attention to insurgency without framing it – completely falsely, if we are to take the conclusions of this otherwise excellent volume seriously – in the terms of a bogus ‘war on terror.’

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