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Book Review

Chaliand, Gérard & Arnaud Blin, eds. 2007. *The History of Terrorism from Antiquity to Al Qaeda*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. viii + 474 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-24533-4 (hb), 978-0-520-24709-3 (pb). Price: \$60.00 (hb), \$24.95 (pb).

by Martin Harrow (17 April 2008)

The book dispenses with moral judgment of terrorism and presents a coolheaded analysis of what terrorism is, how it functions as a strategy, when is it successful, and when is it not. Filled with historical examples makes the book's stringent logic very convincing.

Parallel to the increased attention extended to terrorism since the attacks on 11 September 2001, the concept of terrorism has become obfuscated. This is partly due to policy agents, eager to use the negative connotations of terrorism to legitimize their own actions with phrases like the "global war on terrorism" (which means "a variety of measures against Islamist militancy wherever we find it"). But through numerous publications since 2001, academia also has contributed to the conflation of ideology (Islamism) and tactics (terrorism).

Chaliand and Blin paraphrase Carlos Marighella: "All terrorist groups want to be guerillas when they grow up" (p. 45). The central claim of the book is that terrorism is the easiest form of insurgency and therefore the tactic of choice (although rarely the only) for the weak to a specific end. Terrorism has specific properties that transcend space and time. It has advantages and shortcomings; it is a strategy more often chosen under some circumstances than others and more likely to be successful under some circumstances than others. Chaliand and Blin therefore also dismiss the claim that one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist. Freedom fight describes the aim, terrorism describes a strategy.

A plethora of definitions of terrorism exist, and Chaliand and Blin are commended for not adding another one. Instead, the introductory chapter by Ariel Merari offers a lengthy discussion of terrorism as contrasted to other forms of political violence. Without offering a parsimonious definition of terrorism he reserves the term to small, nonstate actors, using limited violence posing little direct threat to the regime. Terrorism functions by creating attention; but the targeting today of civilian populations (instead of tyrants or government representatives) is a relatively new phenomenon, coupled with popular sovereignty. Historically, terrorism has often been used in the early stages of an insurgency, to "hoist the flag" and recruit adherents, a first step to enable insurgents to eventually move on to other forms of conflict.

Under certain circumstances, terrorism can be successful. As it is seldom the only tactic employed, it is difficult to distinguish the effect of terrorism from the effects of other tactics. The very nature of terrorism is that it cannot by military means create a specific outcome. In most cases, terrorism is a matter of making a given behavior appear more appealing than the alternatives; whether terrorism works is thus a matter of the resolve of the target audience. Chaliand and Blin argue, using historical examples, that in separatist struggles this resolve depends on how close the disputed arena is to notions of national identity. For example, it is inconceivable that the Basque country in Spain could ever be granted independence. For France,

it was considerably more difficult to let go of Algeria, which was legally part of France and had more than one million Frenchmen living among the majority Muslim population, than it was to give up the French protectorates of Tunisia or Morocco. Similarly, it was impossible for the governments of Germany, France, and Italy to compromise with the all-or-nothing ideology of, respectively, the Red Army Fraction, Action Directe, or the Red Brigades. Compromise would have meant the demise of government.

Chaliand and Blin argue that when a government concedes to terrorists, it engages in a sort of “cognitive dissonance,” that is, finding an acceptable way to comply with some or all of terrorists’ demands without seeming to have given in to pressure. The long, violent campaign of ETA did not result in secession from Spain, but the extensive autonomy of the Basque provinces is arguably at least partly the result of ETA terror.

Terrorism lies outside Just War doctrine, which covers *bona fide* states only. So we are left to morally judge terrorism by its consequences. “Terrorists” of the French resistance were heroes because they fought the Nazis and did not indiscriminately target the civilian population. But we condemn the 2005 London bombings because they were directed against an open, democratic society and indiscriminately targeted civilians.

Apart from two introductory chapters, the book comes in three parts: the prehistory of terrorism, terrorism from 1789 to 1968, and terrorism since 1968. The editors have written nine of the seventeen chapters, and the book feels, especially in the first half, like an almost unbroken narrative of terrorism following the same style and logic. Most readers will be interested in al-Qaeda, and it is not surprising that in the empirical chapters, the editors have given great weight to it and to Islamic radicalism. Here the book, however, is in direct competition with the recent and already canonized works of Kepel (*Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*), Burke (*Al-Qaeda: The true Story of Radical Islam*), Sageman (*Understanding Terror Networks*), and Hoffman (*Inside Terrorism*). The chapters about al-Qaeda and Islamism as well as the other chapters about modern terrorism are well written and function fairly well. But the strength of the book lies in its historical chapters in which the authors elegantly cover 2000 years of history. More convincingly than I have previously seen, the authors confidently jump centuries and continents to identify the basic rules, which, regardless of time and context, advance or limit terrorism, steer it toward one tactic over another, and make terror campaign more or less successful.

Martin Harrow, Danish Institute for International Studies.