AS TERRORISM EVOLVES

MEDIA, RELIGION, *and* GOVERNANCE

PHILIP SEIB

"*As Terrorism Evolves: Media, Religion, and Governance* is an ambitious overview of the definitions of terrorism, its chief causes and historical roots, key terrorist groups' goals, methods, media practices, and outcomes, and the recent and future government response options available for handling such threats. Undergraduate or graduate instructors focusing on terrorism will find this book an accessible read that provides important context for the controversies that terrorism raises in the 21st century."

Carol Winkler, *Professor of Communication Studies, Georgia State University*

"This is a concise and well-written book from a veteran scholar of journalism and strategic communication, covering the relation of terrorism to daily life, religion, organization, media, and the future. It is a must-read for teachers, students, or anyone else trying to get to grips with what Prof. Seib correctly calls a "new era of terrorism."

Steven R. Corman, *Professor and Director, Center for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University*

Philip Seib is one of the world's leading authorities on the intersection of media and foreign policy. A frequent visitor to the Middle East, he has examined Arab politics in books such as *The Al Jazeera Effect* (2008) and *Real-Time Diplomacy* (2012). Seib is Professor of Journalism, Public Diplomacy, and International Relations at the University of Southern California and was named International Communication Distinguished Scholar by the International Studies Association. He is author and editor of more than two dozen books and writes frequently for the *Huffington Post* about terrorism and international politics. His interest in terrorism was piqued when he found himself just forty miles from Mosul as that city was being seized by Islamic State in 2014.

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As Terrorism Evolves

Some of the world's most lethal terrorist organizations have become media-centric enterprises, while also hijacking a major world religion, holding large swaths of physical territory, and governing their own virtual states. In this concise and penetrating book, Seib traces how terrorism has proliferated and increased significantly in menace in the relatively brief period between the rise of Al Qaeda and the creation of Islamic State. With close attention to the linkages between media, religion, and violence, the book offers incisive analysis of how organizations such as Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram operate and reflects on how terrorism may continue to evolve. Seib argues that twenty-first-century terrorism is enabled by new media and depends on social networks as connective tissue, while interacting with religion and socioeconomic and political grievances. An indispensable resource for students and knowledgeable nonspecialists, *As Terrorism Evolves* prescribes new measures for counterterrorism efforts, underscores the importance of soft power, and makes a strong case for recognizing that we have entered an era of terrorism of undetermined duration.

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He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction ... Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 1906

Preface

Writing about terrorism is challenging in several ways.

First, it is terribly depressing to survey the destruction that terrorists cause – so many lives destroyed, so much progress reversed. Describing all this is like wading into a fetid swamp from which there seems little chance of escape. This extends to getting to know the terrorists. Some in the lower ranks are just foolishly misguided, but most in these organizations are thugs who seek to justify their behavior by wrapping it in flimsy religiosity.

Also, incidents of outrage occur so frequently that for anyone trying to paint on as broad a canvas as a book, it is hard to keep up. Besides the never-ending attacks, new terrorist groups emerge, new tactics are employed by and against them, and new approaches to counterterrorism are unveiled.

What quickly becomes clear is that twenty-first-century terrorism is, unfortunately, more than a short-lived aberration. Its continuing evolution is the principal theme of this book, and its staying power is growing. Terrorist organizations will have their ups and downs, but they have proved to have survival skills that will sustain them for the foreseeable future. And as Islamic State has shown, terrorists can emerge from their caves and take control of large swathes of territory, perhaps not permanently but long enough to bring the world's great powers into the fight. Further, they can set up governance structures with income generated by everything from extortion to oil production.

So, where are we going with all this? What will post–Islamic State terrorism be like? The blending of insurgency in a defined area with terror attacks globally is frightening enough today, but other extremists are watching Islamic State and learning from its successes and failures. Al Qaeda, for instance, has been reshaping and rebuilding

itself while letting Islamic State be the primary counterterrorism target, and it is poised to build its own caliphate on the rubble Islamic State leaves behind.

All this matters because, in one way or another, terrorism touches all our lives. As we step into a street market in Baghdad or a nightclub in Istanbul, a cloud of worry accompanies us. At an airport in Los Angeles or Paris, we complain about security procedures although we recognize their necessity. While sitting in a movie theater or walking through a shopping mall, we glance at the exits as we recall incidents when someone sprayed gun fire in a public place.

We all literally pay a price for terrorism, with vast amounts of money being directed into counterterrorism programs and military buildups instead of being devoted to education, medical research, or other priorities that would improve our lives.

How we react to terrorism, a phenomenon we do not truly understand, is another matter for concern. Egged on by irresponsible political leaders, some of us lash out at entire groups of people. About 1.6 billion Muslims live around the world, of which only the tiniest percentage engages in violence, and yet terrorism- (and immigration-) related Islamophobia is on the rise. This widening cultural divide obstructs efforts to deal with terrorism and build a constructive civil society.

All these matters served as motivation for writing this book. I hope its readers will see that countering terrorism requires embracing reason, and that well-structured knowledge should prevail over facile emotionalism.

Journalists, historians, religion scholars, and many others have written much about the issues addressed in this book, and I thank them all. (Some of their work is listed in the Select Bibliography at the end of this volume.) More directly, two young scholars, Gozde Kurt and Noorhan Maamoon, helped me with material about Islam. Maura Conway and Romy Froelich, leaders of important projects that examine radicalization, were kind enough to invite me to work with them. My academic colleagues at

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the University of Southern California (USC) and the International Studies Association have consistently been supportive. In our class discussions, my USC students provided much for me to think about.

At Cambridge University Press, Sara Doskow was a steadfast believer in this book and helped me immeasurably with her thoughtful suggestions. She has been wonderful to work with. My ever-patient agent, Robbie Anna Hare of Goldfarb and Associates, always offered encouragement.

I want to also recognize those who, in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, rush to save lives of innocents who are victims of the senseless violence. Ambulance teams, police officers, and even passersby provide assistance and comfort at a terrible moment. It is a sad fact that they have become so important, but their work underscores the breadth of the evolving menace of terrorism. Their efforts should not be overlooked.

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Introduction

Islamic State (IS) held Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, for the better part of three years, all the while encouraging or orchestrating terror attacks in Europe and elsewhere. Its "capital" – Raqqa, Syria – functioned even longer, despite persistent attacks from some of the world's most powerful nations.

Consider what that means in terms of the nature of terrorism. Rather than a singular act, such as the 9/11 attacks in the United States, after which the perpetrators kill themselves, are caught or killed by authorities, or go into hiding, we now have a terrorist organization that seizes substantial amounts of territory, "governs" that territory through a bureaucracy that addresses everything from bomb making to human services, and establishes "provinces" around the world, all the while continuing to spread bloody havoc.

This is the new era of terrorism. The terrorist act has morphed into the terrorist state. It must be understood and confronted.

When an act of terrorism occurs, we – individually and collectively – react with horror, sadness, anger; our responses are grounded in emotion. We then look to law enforcement, the military, and government more broadly to respond, presumably in ways that transcend our own emotional reactions. We expect them to do what is necessary to right the wrong and protect us against further attacks.

Only in rare cases can this latter goal be achieved solely by capturing or killing the perpetrators of a particular attack. Seldom is terrorism the act of a true loner with no ties whatsoever to the global terrorism infrastructure. Even so-called lone-wolf attackers, such as the brothers who committed the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing or the US military officer who went on a rampage at Fort Hood in 2009,

are inspired by terrorist voices that flow so constantly through social media and other channels.

This underscores the difficulty of preventing terrorist acts through preemptive intervention. Prospective violent actors sometimes make errors that allow government agencies to spot them and arrest them before they can commit their crimes, but counting on terrorists to be sloppy is not an effective strategy. The extremist universe is vast, and the people at the center of it are as smart as they are ruthless.

The terrorist act is the capstone of a process that builds from a foundation of alienation and anger. It is nurtured by extreme political or religious beliefs combined with vicious criminality and often fortified by content disseminated through online venues. Linkages among violence, religion, and media are at the heart of the evolution of modern terrorism. By examining these factors individually and collectively, this book illustrates how they mutually reinforce one another and make terrorism more difficult to control.

Further, terrorism's evolutionary process must be recognized as such. Today's terrorism has changed significantly from its previous incarnations, and counterterrorism strategies must be adjusted accordingly to keep pace and perhaps even get ahead to the point at which prevention, not merely reaction, is possible.

Terrorism has caused the deaths of many thousands and has terrified millions more. Just as the Cold War, with its threat of nuclear destruction, loomed over the second half of the twentieth century, terrorism has been taking lives and draining resources throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first ... and it is virtually certain to continue and keep evolving in ways that make it more brutish and resilient.

We are in for a nasty ride during the coming years; this book contends that we have entered a "terrorism era" that has no perceptible end date. The scale, level of proliferation, and skill of communicating and networking demonstrated by terrorist organizations is striking.

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