

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,

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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.

The initial response to this evil phenomenon was to begin a “global war on terror,” which was flawed from the start by its attempt to use conventional methods to deal with an unconventional foe. This was seen in the US response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001. The American military orchestrated the end (at least temporarily) of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and killed many Al Qaeda fighters. The rest of Al Qaeda, including its top leadership, escaped into Pakistan. The United States, like a boxer swinging wildly, extended its military efforts into Iraq and soon found itself trying to manage unmanageable conflicts in two countries. Despite the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, Al Qaeda has expanded its operations throughout the Middle East and parts of Africa, and has recently reached into the Indian subcontinent.

By the time Barack Obama’s presidency began in 2009, the main goal of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq was to devise exit strategies. The label “war on terror” was dropped as if it were an outdated commercial logo, and it was replaced by “countering violent extremism” (CVE), which was supposed to differentiate the new administration’s approach from that of its predecessor. It implicitly relies on a more holistic view of the problem, recognizing that violent extremism, which in some instances may be more intellectual than kinetic, must be addressed before it gains traction.

Broadening the scope of the response to terrorism in this way makes sense on a theoretical level, but designing a comprehensive CVE campaign that involves more than thrust-and-parry tactics has so far proved to be beyond the abilities of numerous governments that have tried to adopt this approach. CVE is supposed to be linked in a fragile partnership with more conventional counterterrorism efforts that capture or kill those identified as terrorists. (Like terrorism, the terminology describing it also evolves. In late 2016, as the Obama presidency neared its end, CVE was on its way out, with *counterterrorism* once more in vogue ... for the moment.)

Meanwhile, the Al Qaeda franchises in the Middle East were strengthened by the experience their fighters had gained on various

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battlegrounds and, beginning in 2011, by the new levels of regional instability produced by that year's Arab uprisings. Hopes were initially high that democratic reforms might supersede autocracy and undercut extremists' rhetoric, but except for Tunisia (tenuously), the "Arab spring" produced a new wave of despotism and chaos, and even in Tunisia, thousands of young people became so exasperated by factors such as the lack of economic progress that they left home to join terrorist armies. The hope of 2011 might recover, but for now it is on life support.

Violence is self-nurturing, and a new player that emerged from the detritus of the Iraq War quickly gained a reputation for its military prowess and vicious methods. In June 2014, the previously little-known IS, an offspring of Al Qaeda in Iraq, captured attention when it seized Mosul. IS soon controlled significant parts of Iraq and Syria, proclaiming that its territory superseded the two countries' official borders and constituted the new Islamic caliphate. It financed itself in numerous ways, such as taxing residents of the territory it occupied, exporting oil, and selling looted antiquities. It recruited new fighters and other "citizens" for the caliphate through compulsion, but also through sophisticated use of social media and other tools, its version of "soft power."

At first, it appeared possible to physically contain IS and isolate it as just another "Arab problem." But soon IS took control of parts of Libya and began sponsoring, or at least encouraging, terror attacks far afield. Even as IS suffers battlefield setbacks, it retains the ability to inspire its "soldiers" abroad to attack civilians. As this is written, Beirut, Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, and Nice are among the cities that have been scenes of IS-orchestrated or IS-inspired mass murders.

IS and its kin clearly require a more forceful and imaginative response from Arab states, the broader *ummah* (global Muslim community), and the rest of the world. Reflexive reliance on conventional military methods that involve little risk, such as drone and aircraft attacks, is dangerously naïve. Needed instead is a

comprehensive strategy that incorporates a tightly focused military effort along with measures that can alter the political environment in which IS recruitment has flourished. This broad approach is essential to cripple IS and prevent it from giving birth to its own successor.

What might that successor be? My argument throughout this book is that the evolution of terrorism is taking us away from the terrorist cells of old and beyond the traditional structure of early Al Qaeda. We have moved into an era of the terrorist organization not merely as a cadre of like-minded persons or as a state-sponsored enterprise, but rather as a statelike entity.

IS is a prototype of this and, given the rapid evolution of terrorist organization, that is cause for great concern. As of early 2017, the IS grip on territory in Iraq and Syria had been loosened but not broken, and the ability of IS to direct or inspire bloody attacks elsewhere in the world was undiminished. IS had become a two-headed monster: a terrorist organization in the traditional sense of mounting attacks throughout the world, and a military insurgency in terms of taking and holding territory.

Confronting terrorism today means not just dealing with individuals such as Osama bin Laden, but rather requires a more comprehensive strategy to confront the networked terrorist state.

I wrote this book after coming closer to IS attacks than I would have preferred. In June 2014, I happened to be on a research trip (not related to terrorism) in Iraqi Kurdistan, about forty miles from Mosul, when IS first occupied that city. There were many thousands of Kurdish Peshmerga fighters between IS and me, so I could remain fairly calm (as most of the Kurds did) while this hitherto little-known phenomenon took hold. But I soon saw the impact of the IS menace. Iraqi Kurdistan, after many years of abuse at the hands of Saddam Hussein and others, had been flourishing, with new investment in everything from oil to education pointing the region toward prosperity. But the new threat changed all that; military spending sucked up Kurdish resources as the region went onto war footing. This is one of

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terrorism's ripple effects: Civil society is forced to set aside constructive ambition while it concentrates on defending itself.

Then, in January 2016 in Istanbul, I realized that I had been standing on the exact spot near the Blue Mosque two days before a bomber, identified as an IS operative, set off a bomb there that killed thirteen tourists. This produced a personalized chill; even coincidental proximity to an attack is a reminder that safety is elusive. Also, there were side effects in Turkey – not bloody, but still damaging. The tourism industry that is such an important part of Turkey's economy suffered a significant setback because of this and other terrorist attacks. Terrorism can destroy livelihoods as well as lives.

My own situation on these two occasions was nothing when compared to the horrors inflicted on the citizens of Mosul or the tourists killed in Istanbul. But I was near enough to be reminded that “terrorism” is not an abstraction. Rather, it is a tangible, pervasive evil that must be confronted and brought to an end. My close calls may not have been all that close, but they motivated me to research and write.

A more prosaic reason for writing this book is that I need it for my university teaching. The courses I teach center on foreign policy and media, and terrorism is a topic that comes up frequently. I don't teach a course that is terrorism specific – there are plenty of detailed books for such offerings – but I needed something that could give my students, within a two- or three-week portion of a course, an overview of terrorism issues and how these matters fit into the broader context of international affairs. I have spent much of my academic career examining the connections between media and international relations, and I find it striking how germane this media-oriented focus is today in assessing terrorism. The communication component of terrorism studies continues to become more important.

And so this book is concise, and I hope interesting.

As with many other topics related to current affairs, terrorism does not hold still for analysis. It slithers its way into new identities and atrocities. Although as of early 2017 IS was capturing most terrorism-related headlines, it is far from being the only

extremist threat. The US State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations includes fifty-seven non-IS groups. Most striking is the geographical range of these organizations: Boko Haram in Nigeria; Al Shabaab in Somalia; the Haqqani network in Afghanistan; Jemaah Islamiya in Indonesia; Hamas in Gaza; the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey; the Real Irish Republican Army; and others scattered across the globe. In the United States, fear and anger about "radical Islamic terrorism" tends to overshadow threats posed by domestic terrorists who have no ties to "radical Islam" but commit their crimes with numbing frequency, as when they kill Planned Parenthood clients in Colorado Springs and police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" response to individual terrorists and terrorist organizations. Their tactics and degrees of success vary depending on the political and military environments in which they operate, as well as the comparative skills of their own leaders and those who oppose them. What they have in common is their poisonous effect on civil society and the pain they inflict on innocents.

Although violent extremism, in one form or another, has been with us since ancient times, this book focuses on the twenty-first century, which is when the linkages among media, religion, and violence have become so striking and the evolution of terrorism has accelerated. In Chapter 1 we look at the definitions of modern terrorism, of which there are many, propounded by governments and others. As terrorist organizations become more sophisticated and some, such as IS, attain quasistate identities, definitions of *terrorism* may collide with those of *insurgency*, a distinction addressed in the first chapter. The somewhat facile notion that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter" needs examining, but so does the propensity of some to sweepingly dismiss actions responding to legitimate political grievances as terrorism. Just as terrorism evolves, so too must the terminology used in describing it.

Also in Chapter 1, we examine how terrorism affects our lives and how far we want to go in trying to counter it. Extremist violence

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today haunts many of us. Who gets on an airplane without eyeing fellow passengers and contemplating scenarios of a hijack or midair explosion? Who shops at a street market in the Middle East or elsewhere without pondering the threat of a suicide bomber? How many democracies feel it appropriate to chip away at individuals' freedoms while trying to protect citizens from terrorists? Such questions illustrate terrorists' ability to insinuate themselves into our personal and community existence. This is the essence of terrorism.

The next step is to analyze the terrorists. What drives men, women, and even children to commit such horrific acts? Many of them have given careful thought to their actions, have specific political or personal ideals they embrace, and are willing to give their lives on behalf of those ideals. As warped as we may consider their behavior to be, there is a logic of sorts that drives these people forward. They must be understood before they can be countered.

Chapter 2 examines the relationship between terrorism and religion. Although not all violent extremism is rooted in religion, and not all terrorists who *are* motivated by religion are Muslims, the connection between many devastating instances of extremism and Islam is a reality that cannot be ignored. This book grapples with that reality, recognizing that it is important in understanding the most pervasive forms of terrorism today and game-changing moments in the evolution of terrorism. That said, stereotyping must be avoided. Muslims worldwide number about 1.6 billion, and by the year 2050 Islam will nearly match Christianity in size. Only a tiny minority of Muslims are violent extremists, but in the view of much of the global public, Muslims' religion is synonymous with the violence perpetrated in Islam's name.

In addressing this connection, Chapter 2 argues that short- and long-term solutions must originate within Islam; measures such as introducing critical thinking into the curricula of *madrasas* have met with success on a small scale, and many imams have urged those who attend their mosques to push back against those who justify violence on religious grounds. The vast majority of Muslims are as horrified

as anyone else by terrorist acts. But those Muslims and others who try to use religion in constructive ways find their work complicated by virulent anti-Muslim sentiment that strengthens extremists' case that Islam is under siege.

Chapter 3 focuses on terrorists' organizational skills and makes the case that these continue to mature. Al Qaeda began as vertically organized, with Osama bin Laden issuing directives from the top to his lieutenants and foot soldiers, such as those who participated in the 9/11 attacks against the United States. By the time bin Laden was killed a decade later, Al Qaeda had evolved into more of a network, with "franchises" such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. These groups had enough autonomy that they were little affected by bin Laden's death. Soon thereafter, one of the franchises, Al Qaeda in Iraq, broke away from Al Qaeda and renamed itself IS, also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Da'esh, which is the transliterated Arabic for ISIL. (For simplicity, IS will be used throughout this book except when the other names occur in direct quotes.)

IS's name is far less relevant than is its advanced form of organization. In pursuit of its claim to be a statelike "caliphate," IS developed a civic infrastructure that seeks adherents by providing basic services, purportedly cracking down on corruption, and – most important – offering stability in areas where that has long been unknown. IS also uses sectarianism to its advantage, portraying itself as defender of Sunnis against Shia enemies. It keeps order through a fiercely punitive religiosity, which becomes even more vicious when IS is being battered by its enemies. IS also conducts public diplomacy of sorts through its sophisticated media operations.

Although IS is associated in most people's minds with its grim execution videos, there is far more to it than that. It appeals to Muslim physicians to work in IS hospitals, teachers to work in IS schools, and media experts to present IS to the world (and especially

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to potential recruits). The message IS sends to many of its target audiences is not “come kill,” but rather “Come build the caliphate. Leave behind the life in which you are treated badly because you are a Muslim, and instead join us in defending our faith.” The appeal is not unlike the nineteenth-century advice to American pioneers, “Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.” IS believes that it, too, has a manifest destiny.

As of this writing in 2017, IS has achieved a considerable level of success. Although it has been attacked by a US-led military coalition, as well as Iranian and Arab forces, it survives and continues to attract recruits from throughout the world. Although intelligence accounts differ, IS seems to be dispersing its fighters and resources to places where the military outlook is more favorable and where it can regroup and grow. Even as it sees the territory under its control shrinking, it presumably is dispatching trained killers to the homelands of its enemies.

Meanwhile, IS’s well-publicized activities inspire other extremist groups. In central Africa, for example, Boko Haram, which has pledged its allegiance to IS, has a more loosely organized presence that seems to rely on terror for the sake of terror. Well armed and aggressively led, Boko Haram possesses combat capabilities that exceed those of some militaries in the region. That makes Boko Haram a significant destabilizing force in an area where numerous governments – especially those that lean toward democracy – are innately fragile.

One thing that IS, Boko Haram, and other extremist groups have in common is their reprehensible treatment of women. Rape and kidnapping are standard, as are keeping and selling women as sex slaves, and, in numerous cases, executing women. This is not new; rape and other mistreatment of women have long occurred during conflict. But the persistence of such evil says something about the fundamental nature of today’s terrorist organizations, and the tendency to give such matters only secondary attention says something about contemporary society. This chapter argues that this behavior