

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.

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.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41970-3 — As Terrorism Evolves
Philip Seib
Frontmatter
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Media, Religion, and Governance

PHILIP SEIB

University of Southern California



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108411691

DOI: 10.1017/9781108303996

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First published 2017

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-41970-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-41169-1 Paperback

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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

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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

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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

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.