

Review

‘Terrorism’

“What terrorists want: Understanding the enemy, containing the threat” by Louise Richardson, Random House, 2006, 213 pages. Page numbers refer to the 2007 paperback edition.

Reviewed by Rob Fairmichael

Introduction

Louise Richardson may be the chair of the Irish government’s current (2023) Consultative Forum on International Security but in this piece I try to restrict myself to a review of the book concerned which helped ‘make her name’. Already a lecturer and academic in the field of international security (the book was published in 2006), she recalls how terrorism was more of a personal interest (page xi) until she started teaching a course on it in response to student interest; then 9/11 made her in widespread demand as a speaker. She has been a high flyer on both sides of the Atlantic (there is plenty about her online) and the subject of some controversies.

This is a competent and comprehensive book within her terms of reference. I am structuring this review to first of all give a brief summary of the book – sensible and informed on many aspects of the topic – before then giving a critique pointing out where I feel she is neither sensible nor informed.. This is to allow her analysis and arguments to be digested first. But even in a fairly lengthy review I cannot cover many points she makes.

Summary

The book is written from a sometimes guardedly critical US American viewpoint (she is a US citizen of Irish origin), post 9/11. She begins at the very beginning by asking “What is terrorism?” She comes to a precise definition: “Terrorism simply means deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes” (page 4) and goes on to state clearly “Terrorism is indeed a weapon of the weak”. (page 5).

However she also states emphatically, while noting it is controversial, that “terrorism is the act of sub-state groups, not states”. She goes on to give instances of states using terror or terrorism but says “if we want to have any analytical clarity in understanding the behaviour of terrorist groups, we must understand them as substate actors rather than states.” However she does mention the term ‘terror’ coming from the French Revolution when it was terror “from above, imposed by the state” (page 29). She goes on to detail the fact that terrorism has been used by many different kinds of groups, on all ends of the political spectrum, with both secular and religious backgrounds.

She also quickly seeks to establish that terrorists are normal people, not deranged: “Their primary shared characteristics is their normalcy, insofar as we understand the term”. And she continue that “Terrorists are substate actors who violently target noncombatants to communicate a political message to a third party”.

She gives a number of Irish illustrations in the book, from reputable sources, for example referring to the Fenian bombing of Clerkenwell Prison in London in 1967 to emphasise it is not a new phenomenon – and she goes back rather further in history to look at ‘Zealots’, ‘Thugs’, ‘Assassins’ etc. She also refers a number of times to aspects of the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland.

As to the causes of terrorism, she states “The emergence of terrorism requires a lethal cocktail with three ingredients: a disaffected individual, an enabling group, and a legitimizing ideology.” (page 40) “Terrorists see the world in Manichean, black-and-white terms; they identify with others; and they desire revenge.” But leaders in terrorist groups are often from higher socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. (page 45) Ethnonationalist terrorist groups tend to last the longest because they have close ties to their communities. (page 48) State sponsorship can strengthen terrorist movements but it is not a cause of terrorism (page 64) while poverty and inequality increase the likelihood of terrorism emerging. (page 67)

She depicts terrorists as having three aims: revenge, renown and reaction. (page 71) As to whether terrorism works, she certainly details how it can have effects, includes pushing the state to further repression. She argues correctly that those who say the power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland “has rewarded the terrorism of the IRA are quite wrong. The IRA did not wage a terrorist campaign to share power with Protestants in Northern Ireland. Quite the contrary...” (page 75)

She rightly points out that the USA’s invasion of Afghanistan provided (terrorists with) “a great many more actions to be avenged”, (page 92) and elsewhere criticises the false linking of Iraq and Saddam Hussein to 9/11. In terms of ‘knowing your enemy’ she points out that US leaders did not realise the enmity between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. (page 168) She spends a chapter on suicide terrorism, and discusses different forms of weapons (and difficulties with using chemical or biological weapons, for example).

Regarding 9/11 itself, she quotes George W Bush saying 9/11 changed the world but says that it was “our reaction to September 11 that changed the world” (“our” here meaning, as it does elsewhere in the book, the USA). (page 167) She also states quite clearly that the USA declaring a ‘war on terror’ was declaring war on a tactic, not on those who committed the crime (9/11) and was a war that could not be won. US reaction led to rapidly making most people in the world have more negative views about the USA; “By declaring war yet refusing to be bound by the agreed constraints on warfare and refusing to conduct the war through existing international institutions, the United States alienated its allies and confirmed the worst views of neutrals and adversaries.” (page 179)

Missed opportunities “were the opportunities to educate the American public to the realities of terrorism and to the costs of our sole superpower status and the opportunity to mobilize the international community behind us...” (page 170).

She quotes the British “Thompson Principles” (page 185) for counterinsurgency warfare: “1. The primacy of the political 2. Coordination of government machinery 3. Obtaining intelligence 4. Separating the insurgent from his base of support 5. Neutralizing the insurgent 6. Postinsurgency planning”. I would point out that it is debateable the extent to which the British followed these rules in relation to Northern Ireland, particularly rules 1, 4 and 6.

Her own guidance for counterinsurgency or containing the threats of terrorists (page 203+) has the following headings: Rule 1: Have a defensible and achievable goal Rule 2: Live by your principles Rule 3: Know your enemy Rule 4: Separate the terrorists from their communities Rule 5: Engage others in countering terrorists with you Rule 6: Have patience and keep your perspective.

She is right in stating that (page 219) “The fact that someone who has committed heinous crimes makes allegations against us does not mean that those allegations are without foundation and should be dismissed out of hand” and takes the example of bin Laden’s criticisms of US sanctions on Iraq (which may have killed half a million children because of lack of medicines and so on).

She also criticises the tactic of supporting one group using violence against another (page 229) with the example of the USA supporting the mujahedin in Afghanistan against the USSR: “This tactic inevitably backfires.”

“The language of warfare connotes action and immediate results. We need to replace this language with the language of development and construction and the patience that goes along with it.” (page 232)

Critique

This book is a thorough treatment of the subject written from a fairly pro-state point of view, and, despite many criticisms of the USA, still from a US viewpoint (it is ‘we’ throughout). It is a pro-state view because she opines that terrorism is a substate action despite referring to some state terrorist actions (see earlier in this review and more examples in the book). She makes many sensible judgements about the nature of ‘terrorism’.

However I would say that not to include ‘state terrorism’ in ‘terrorism’ is a colossal mistake. This lets states off the hook. And amazingly (page 5), in her limited coverage of state terrorism, she does not include the USA! Think Vietnam and Cambodia. Think Afghanistan or Iraq. Think Chile, Nicaragua and Cuba. In fact in relation to the last three countries, she states (page 52) “An examination of these cases reveals that the United States had very good reasons to object to the governments of Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua. Their ideological orientation was inimical to its own, so it supported local groups that used whatever means were available to them to try to bring them down.” For the full context of this you need to see the section concerned but, whether this is her own view or a summary of US views (it is not quite clear), not making further comment is without doubt whitewashing US government state terrorism.. Whether this whitewashing is intentional or unintentional does not matter because it is still a massive misjudgement in the book.

You can argue that she is a) a US citizen, and b) an academic, and therefore her language is measured. But occasionally I feel she lets things slip out such as (page 198) “By pursuing terrorists like the criminals they are....” Having argued that they are rational, she now labels them as ‘criminals’. Of course they may be, according to the laws of the land they are fighting, but this is a more definite labelling in a derogatory sense.

I would firmly argue that only talking about substate actors in relation to terrorism makes it meaningless. I don’t tend to use the term ‘terrorism’ myself, although I do in certain contexts (e.g where other people do, as in this review), preferring to talk about the level of violence used and the context irrespective of it emanating from state or non-state sources. Using the term ‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist’ immediately introduces many derogatory assumptions though Richardson’s coverage does get behind a lot of that prejudice.

Substate 'terrorists', if they are effective and luck is on their side, can kill or murder dozens, or, in the case of 9/11, up to a few thousand. State terrorism can be effective in killing and murdering hundreds of thousands or even millions. And there are no shortage of examples; Stalin's 'Terror' is another example of where the term is a recognised one in relation to state action.

There is no reason you cannot differentiate, as appropriate, between state and substate 'terrorism' or does she, at some level, feel state violence can be more legitimised or is qualitatively different? Her argument, mentioned above, to not include state terrorism is weak and not developed (and, I would argue, wrong in any case). Saying that one must reject the concept of state terrorism for "analytical clarity in understanding the behaviour of terrorist groups" is simply not true; all you need to do is say you are talking about 'substate terrorism', if that is what is being done.

The extent to which 'terrorists' target noncombatants and civilians (quoted earlier, page 20) varies significantly. She should have qualified her statement. In Northern Ireland at some stages republican paramilitaries, while stating that they were attacking state agents, extended that so far in their range of 'legitimate targets' as to include a very considerable section of the population. Obviously they did target uninvolved citizens at times, particularly as part of their campaign to make Northern Ireland look ungovernable and uncontrollable through attacks on public spaces, transport and new infrastructure; but this was attacks on structures more than people. Their first aim was to attack army and police, not civilians (I am not trying to go into any detailed analysis here of sectarian aspects of republican violence in Northern Ireland, of which there were plenty).

Loyalists in Northern Ireland, while targeting high profile figures on the republican side, had a more fluid concept of who to target – the 'any Taig will do' approach (mirrored in Sunni/Shi'a attacks in Iraq). However the bald statement that terrorists attack civilians for political purposes is simply not accurate. It only makes sense if she had (which she doesn't) a separate category such as 'guerrilla fighters' to cover those who attack state agents.

She is beyond morally and strategically dubious grounds when she says (page 52) that "It's not only the bad guys who use terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy. Sometimes the good guys do too." So this would seem to be supporting 'good guy' terrorism – would that by any chance be the US actions in Chile, Nicaragua and Cuba mentioned earlier? This is a downright contradiction of international law, as she should know as a former lecturer in law at Harvard Law School. It is an appalling and unworthy justification. And who should decide what is 'good guy' terrorism? The USA? Louise Richardson? She does not qualify her statement by saying "and that is a mistake".

In relation to her analysis of the aims of terrorism being the 3 'R's – revenge, renown, reaction – this is part of it, but for some groups, certainly in their own estimation, 'success' was a larger goal. The chances of the IRA getting the 'Brits out' might have been slim in more rational consideration but it was a real goal for a period for them. Similarly the LTTE in Sri Lanka wanted success. People engaged in violence of this sort may be partly blinded by their own ideology but does this make their ultimate goal not an aim? Not in every case but the 'S' of 'Success' should surely be added to the 3 'R's, although you can distinguish between immediate and ultimate aims.

In addition, 'terrorists' are not the only people to see the world in black and white terms, and want revenge. Saying that "Terrorists see the world in Manichean, black-and-white terms; they identify with others; and they desire revenge" could be talking about the US response to 9/11.

The war in Ukraine is, unfortunately, a classic current example of this. 'The West' seems incapable of understanding how it has contributed to the unfolding catastrophe, primarily through the expansion of NATO but also not giving Russian speakers in the east of Ukraine their proposed relative autonomy, and possibly also in not supporting Russia in the transition from communism. The failure to push for negotiations in the war, and stymieing what opportunities existed early on, are monumental errors occasioned by that wartime 'black and white' illusion. I am not saying that Putin is not the main person to blame for the bloodshed (with his own illusions or delusions); I am saying 'the West' contributed significantly in the lead up to the debacle, and has continued to add fuel to the flames.

Some final comments relate to the accuracy of her facts. I noticed errors in relation to her coverage of Ireland which, given her Irish origin, I find astonishing and makes me wonder about the accuracy of other facts given in the book. She refers to coming as a 17 year old to Trinity College Dublin, presumably 1975, and joining "the student branch of the IRA." (page xv) She may have been writing primarily for a US audience but this is incredibly sloppy and misleading language; she may indeed have joined the student branch of Sinn Féin which was in alliance with the IRA, the latter even being the senior partner at the time in what participants referred to as the 'republican movement' - but joining the IRA at a freshers fair she did not.

She also refers (in footnote 4 to the Introduction) to the IRA before the split into Provisionals and Officials as being the "Old" IRA. No it wasn't. "Old IRA" refers back to the War of Independence. And while quoting approvingly Denis Halliday's insights on UN sanctions on Iraq (p.220) she inexplicably refers to him as 'Fred' Halliday (the footnote link has his correct name). If she gets these Irish details wrong, what other mistakes are there that should have been weeded out in a proper proofing?

There is much that is sensible in this book in trying to understand the phenomenon of 'terrorism'. However while she can be very critical of US actions post-9/11, there is no indication that she is, per se, opposed to US state power and superpower status, nor indeed to NATO – reading between the lines it would seem she feels that post-9/11 action should have been coordinated through NATO. NATO is not solely a 'defensive' body; as well as being committed to first use of nuclear weapons (illegal) there are interventions like the disastrous one in Libya in 2011. Nor does she mention the possibility that the Taliban in Afghanistan, if the USA played its cards right, might even have 'given up' bin Laden and al-Qaeda to international justice without any war anywhere. And, as analysed above, some of her definitions of terrorism are simply inadequate, even within her own parameters.

Part of the subtitle of the book is 'Understanding the enemy'. That subtitle might have been added by the publishers rather than Louise Richardson herself, but what do you do to enemies? Defeat them/kill them militarily or turn them into friends? She deals with the failure of the USA post-9/11 to take the globe with them and despite detailing how US funding could win friends and influence people (she gives the example of US funding to Indonesia after natural disasters) still seems to fall into some of the traps of tending to see security in military rather than broader human terms.

There is a downloadable INNATE poster (available at <https://innatenonviolence.org/wp/posters/> and go to 'Terrorism....') which states "Terrorism' – The big terrorists get away with it". The illustration or cartoon accompanying this from Len Munnik shows a large figure with a sizeable bomb under his arm giving out to a very much smaller figure who is lighting the fuse on a small stick of explosive. That is the situation we have in relation to 'terrorism' and unfortunately Louise Richardson does not deal with that.