



Book review: Wars of Terror, Gabriele Marranci

by Erika Brady



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'Wars of Terror' takes a fresh view of the Islamic terrorist threat which exists in the world today. As an anthropologist, Marranci brings this non-traditional focus to the analysis of counter-terrorism, supplanting the more traditional political analyses to explore human interactions and social perceptions in an effort to provide better understanding of why Islamic terrorism is taking place. To do this, Marranci focuses on the emotion of fear, the dynamics of which have resulted, he claims, in pushing some individuals to develop specific ways of perceiving their environment with its challenges and threats. At the heart of his argument is the notion of what it means to be human, with the 'other' being described as inhuman, uncivilised or barbaric. Rather than taking Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' (1996) as a linchpin for his analysis, Marranci instead presents the central notion that it is individual civilisers who have been responsible for what he considers 'wars of terror'. He states: "The War on Terror, its rhetoric and paraphernalia has hidden this more complex, and dangerous, reality of civilizational discourse and with it the clash of civilizers."

Throughout the book, Marranci provides an in-depth analysis of the existing theories and literature which attempt to unravel the motivation and historical context for the development of Islamic terrorism. While this is not an easy feat, Marranci provides a useful overview, building on his previous research including extensive interviews with Muslims from around the world.

At the outset, he provides a historical overview of Islamic terrorist attacks which primarily have taken place in the West between December 1985 and spring 1996. Following this factual overview, he states: "Never again would Europe experience such frequency and intensity of what was called 'Islamic terrorism'. No politician, during those years, made any reference to 'war' or questioned the possibility that such actions may be a serious threat to 'Western civilisation'." (2015, 3) This point presents a theme which continues throughout the book: that it is a change in narrative, rather than a change in ability or strategy, that has made Islamic terrorism the entity it is today and has framed the narrative that we are engaged in an existential war (or series of wars).

As the book progresses, Marranci replaces the traditional political and contextual analyses, which he uses as foundational starting points, with his anthropological focus and explores such scholarly literature which identifies a difference between emotions (physical reactions) and feelings (cerebral reactions). Marranci refers to Huntington's (1996) theory that the liberal and democratic Western civilization and oppressive and undeveloped Islamic civilization were culturally incompatible and contends that "the dynamic has less to do with culture and geographical essentialism and more to do with human emotions." (2015, 98) He goes on to focus on the prominence of the emotion of fear in his argument. Marranci states that some Muslim communities perceive, in regard to the West, not only a "deep injustice" but also a "high degree of hypocrisy" (2015, 106). Examples of this, they claim, can be seen in drone attacks and Hellfire missiles, where innocent civilians often lose their lives. All of this, Marranci proposes, is linked to emotions and feelings.

By looking back through history at 'civilisational narratives', that is Western and non-Western perspectives, Marranci provides interesting insights into both grievances and motivations that have established the notion of 'fear of the other' in today's psyche. This historical look at the complex



socio-dynamic issues which have developed through interactions over centuries ensure that the reader achieves a perspective on what Marranci calls 'wars on terror' that differs from most political analyses of the issue.

The framework of the book is presented as an exploration of a number of concepts. Concepts such as labels, stigmas, gender issues, conspiracism and justice are both applicable to Western and non-Western views of the so-called wars of terror and are recognisable as emotive and topical aspects of terrorism narratives. Marranci applies the anthropological analysis to these concepts through an exploration of the existing literature and the application of social implications for a Western and non-Western societies. Yet what truly provides the unique insight in this book is the exploration of the notions of 'occidentalism' and 'jahiliyya'. Occidentalism is put forward as a "dehumanizing picture of the West by its enemies" and whose origins arose out of the "same thinking that characterised the Enlightenment movements in Europe" (2015, 54) while jahiliyya has been "translated as a state of ignorance" (2015, 56) or might also be referred to as 'barbarism'. It is rare to find an exploration of these non-Western concepts in terrorism literature, and the introductory analysis carried out in 'Wars of Terror' opens the possibility of better understanding between two societies that perceive their struggle as existential.

The notions of occidentalism and jahiliyya, and the actions and reactions resulting from these beliefs among some Muslim communities, lead Marranci to discuss Bateson's (2002) concept of 'symmetrical changes', a macro example of which is armament races. In particular, Bateson identified the notion of "progressive escalation, which [he] called 'schismogenesis'. Bateson noticed that certain rituals or realities can either inhibit or stimulate schismogenic relations. As (is proffered) in this book, the 'circle of panic' (part of Marranci's emotional analysis) and the associated 'rituals' are reinforcing the symmetrical schismogenic property of a clash of civilizers, of which the War on Terror is nothing but a product."

The final chapter links the many concepts raised throughout the book together and ties them into Marranci's own conclusions. Here, he again analyses the various terms and historical contexts discussed throughout the book, summarising each chapter with the knowledge that the reader has now developed the tools necessary to assess the state of the field as well as make conclusions regarding emotional Islam and the circle of panic which he claims have led to the wars of terror. In conclusion, Marranci states: "If my assumption is correct ... then the only way of ensuring that we do not remain trapped within the wars of terror is to stop this circle of panic." (2015, 130) He suggests that "what we are observing is the result of a cognitive process that brings certain individuals to look at others through their own narrative of civilisation." (2015, 123) This anthropological view is eminently useful in helping to build an understanding of the complex motivations for the asymmetrical conflicts taking place across the globe and more particularly between the West and the non-West civilisers.

Marranci adeptly integrates the theories and perspectives put forward by others within the framework of this publication, and this integration provides a strong and unbiased contribution to the field, where all sides of an argument are put forward and his own conclusions made. That being said, at times the book reads more as an overview of existing research and literature than as a completely original analysis. While this is a worthy endeavour, particularly from the under-applied perspective of anthropology on terrorism studies, a more in-depth qualitative or quantitative approach to the research would provide a fresh and, to some extent, unique insight into what is a complex and challenging topic. Nonetheless, Marranci's work here paves the way for future research in the area and his aim to provide further insight into an area of the field of terrorism research which has not been appropriately explored to date is laudable. There is a clear need for this type of publication



and the format and style, while not necessarily appealing to the broader population, certainly provides a substantive contribution to the academic field, especially from an inter-disciplinary perspective. I believe this book provides a solid foundation for future research in this area and will undoubtedly become a must read for those attempting to understand the complexity of the Islamic terrorism of modern times.

Bibliography

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