



Book Reviews

Barry Scott Zellen, *State of Recovery: The Quest to Restore American Security After 9/11* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013)

Gilbert Ramsay, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013)

reviewed by Richard English

‘Technology to the Rescue.’ Barry Scott Zellen’s intriguing and impressive new book examines the deployment of technological innovation by the United States, as it has attempted to ensure its security from threat after the atrocity of 9/11. In the words of Zellen’s own manifesto here: ‘*State of Recovery* examines the numerous efforts by technologists and homeland security policy makers dedicated to restoring security and ameliorating the insecurity felt after the attacks more than a decade ago.’

It is a fascinating account. The author considers the dramatic US rise in technology spending, both public and private, since 2001; he assesses the remarkable innovation evident in recent years in biometrics, in information security, and in protection regarding aviation, underground travel, sporting events, food, and the mail system, as well as the reorganization (with the Department of Homeland Security and so forth) of US structures of prevention; he ranges widely over non-terrorist dangers, such as those posed by hostile states (North Korea, Iran), by illegal migration into America, and by increasing border violence.

Zellen is an admirably prolific and highly intelligent scholar. Here, he recognizes that some measure of insecurity and threat will prove residual. And some very good points are made. One of the repeatedly important lessons which emerges from this thoughtful book is the constant need for ensuring intra- and inter-state coordination, cooperation, and partnerships (together with organizational streamlining). Regrettably, it is an insight more easily stated than it is adhered to in effective manner.

No book is flawless. Zellen does not sustainedly explore the degree to which some of the USA’s main counter-terrorist efforts in recent years (especially in relation to Iraq) have actually generated more intense kinds of terrorist threat than had previously existed. Relatedly, he is better on the innovative technological brilliance involved in, for example, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles than he is in considering the possible blowback costs which the USA and its allies are likely to have to pay for drones’ lethal use. Here, as so often, there can be a seeming disjunction between the extraordinarily high levels of technical and technological sophistication shown by counter-terrorist states, and the sometimes crass naivety of states’ political and social approaches to the causation and likely dynamics of enduring conflict.

Zellen has interviewed some fascinating people involved in the world which he delineates. At times, I felt that he might have interrogated their assumptions and claims rather more stringently than he does, in light of other–corroborating or sceptical–sources. So the chapter on nuclear terrorism might perhaps be justified in its somewhat anxious tone; but this would have seemed more persuasive to me had Zellen engaged with the less alarmist arguments of scholars such as Michael Levi (which he does not).

One of the things that Zellen suggests is that ‘both the terrorists as well as those who fight them are finding that the internet has become a theatre of war unto itself’. This raises important questions, which Gilbert



Ramsay's compelling and original new book aims to address. Ramsay too is a scholar of extremely high intelligence, and *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* importantly assesses online jihadism not merely as a security threat, but 'as something of cultural interest in its own right', something 'dependent, but not reducible to the real-world violence which it claims to be premised on'. Dr Ramsay suggests that security concerns have been rather exaggerated in this realm, and that the relationship between the internet and terrorist violence is far more complex than many observers assume.

He makes a convincing case. In doing so, he distinguishes between jihadis (supporters of Jihadi Salafism; people who are committed to jihad) and mujahidin (those who practise violent jihad in a physical sense). His central case is that, paradoxically, most jihadis acknowledge the fundamental duty to take part in militant activities in which they, in fact, take no physical part: 'There is, in a sense, an independent online "jihadi culture" which offers practices, forms of satisfaction, forms of value which, though theoretically premised on the goal of supporting the mujahidin, are not wholly reducible to it'; 'purely online activity can be a worthwhile activity in its own right'. It is not that online jihadism is irrelevant to or utterly independent of physically violent jihad; but, according to Ramsay's argument, it cannot be satisfactorily understood or explained purely by reference to that violence. Online jihadism can be meaningful and prestigious and pleasurable in its own creative, imaginative right.

Provocatively, Dr Ramsay develops an argument that we might understand online jihadism more properly if we consider it a species of fandom. So value and a world of alternative morality are here bestowed by the online culture and practices themselves. They relate, yes, to violent acts, and sometimes do so in a nastily celebratory way. But most jihadis do not practise violence, and probably never have any likelihood of doing so: 'For some at least, it would seem that participation in the jihadi forum is its own reward'.

The book, of course, cannot answer all questions. It would be intriguing to know more about what the mujahidin think of the jihadis, and more about the jihadis themselves on the basis of sources beyond the internet: their actual-world (presumably diverse?) contexts, their multiple motivations, their various trajectories, and their relationships.

It also seems to me that there are some (reasonably encouraging and calming) policy implications to be drawn out from Gilbert Ramsay's powerful book. He is right to stress that government should not see online jihadism purely through the lens of counter-terrorism. But if online jihadis are as he convincingly presents them, then much governmental anxiety and policy prescription in this realm seems unnecessary or even counter-productive. For this reason, as well as for its intellectually pioneering insights and theoretical subtlety, the book deserves high praise and a wide readership.

About the reviewer: **Richard English** is Wardlaw Professor of Politics in the School of International Relations, and Director of the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), at the University of St Andrews. He was born in 1963 in Belfast, where he worked at Queen's University between 1989 and 2011. He is the author of seven books, including the award-winning studies *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003) and *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006). His most recent book, *Modern War: A Very Short Introduction*, was published in 2013 by Oxford University Press. He is also the co-editor of a further five books and has published more than forty journal articles and book chapters. He is a frequent media commentator on terrorism and political violence, and on Irish politics and history, including work for the BBC, ITN, SKY NEWS, NPR, RTE, the *Irish Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek* and the *Financial Times*. His research has received funding from, among others, the British Academy, the Economic



*and Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation. In 2009 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA). In 2012, Pan Macmillan published an updated version of *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, in which Richard English analyses recent developments, including the growth of Irish Dissident Republicanism.*