Terrorism scholars: book essay

by Richard English

When I first began to read about terrorism many years ago, two of the scholars whose work most impressed me were Martha Crenshaw and Bruce Hoffman. Now, well into the post-9/11 period, both scholars continue to generate powerful and important work.

Martha Crenshaw and her recent co-author Gary LaFree were both involved in the creation of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), and they bring with them different disciplinary perspectives. Crenshaw is a Political Scientist, while LaFree's background is in Criminology, and their 2017 volume *Countering Terrorism* benefits from that dual analytical inheritance. Their aim in regard to counter-terrorist responses is to encourage "sensible and moderate policy decisions based on a realistic appraisal of the threat" (viii). In particular, their insightful book aims 'to explain the characteristics of terrorism that make it inherently difficult for governments, especially the US government, to formulate effective counter-terrorism policies' (1). They argue – rightly, in my view – that the complexity of analysis regarding terrorist definition, classification, explanation and response makes sound policy more problematic to achieve; and they suggest that terrorist attacks' atypicality represents one of the main issues to be faced.

There is much to applaud in the calmly expressed arguments that are offered in the book. Crenshaw and LaFree note the persistent problem of unhelpful state over-reaction to terrorist atrocity; they are honest about the counter-productive effects of the 2003 Iraq invasion and subsequent imbroglio; they stress that very many terrorist attacks generate no fatalities, and that most planned terrorist attacks fail or are foiled; and they are clear about the heterogeneity of terrorists and terrorisms, a reality which makes it 'hard to identify trends and patterns' (49). One important aspect of their work is to point out how feeble most terrorist ventures actually are: 'nearly half (49 percent) of all terrorist organizations recorded as active since 1970 – 1,147 organizations – have committed only one known attack'; 'a sizeable majority of organizations – nearly 70 percent – last on average for less than a year' (114-5).

The focus of the book is primarily on the USA, a reflection of one of the important aspects of post-9/11 terrorism scholarship: the different centres of gravity that are often evident between those respectively based in the US and those working elsewhere.[1] But the insights of the book are relevant for readers across many countries and locations. The authors refer to 'the polarized and simplistic qualities of many debates about terrorism in the public arena' (196), and their book offers the chance for people to remedy this through consideration of policy-relevant but evidence-based analysis.

The third edition of Bruce Hoffman's *Inside Terrorism* renews readers' familiarity with the author's previous arguments about the fluidity of the phenomenon and brings the blood-stained tale up to date with careful arguments about al-Qaida and ISIS. There is serious-minded attention in the book to issues of definition, to the origins of modern terrorist violence and to some key themes

[1] R. English, 'The Future Study of Terrorism', *European Journal of International Security* 1/2 (July 2016), pp. 135-49.

within that violence (the relationship between religion and terrorism, for instance, or the residually shocking tactic of suicide terrorism, a method possessing 'continuing appeal' (180)).

Professor Hoffman does not dodge the issue of state-sponsored terrorism, and he offers also a brave analysis of 'New and Continuing Challenges' (298), coloured by religiously-motivated terrorism and the foreign fighter problem. Hoffman recognizes many continuities across terrorism's different eras (the average age of involvement, for example, remains youthfully consistent), and he criticizes false orthodoxies such as the persistent belief that poverty and lack of education powerfully generate terrorist violence.

Foreign fighters as such are themselves not new either, although Hoffman points out that the scale of the recent jihadist phenomenon is distinctive. This, together with the violence of ISIS and the fact that 'al-Qaida's demise is neither ordained nor imminent' (320), lead the author towards a certain pessimism: 'Bin Laden would arguably be a happy man were he still alive' (325). Hoffman sensibly cautions against any assumption that a war on terrorism will prove victorious any time soon. But, as the tension between state and non-state actor continues, the scholarly insights of this major book will continue to have a well-deserved influence.

Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman have not always agreed on terroristic matters, and Sageman's *Misunderstanding Terrorism* devotes a fair amount of space to attacking Professor Hoffman's arguments again. In reality, much that Sageman says can be reconciled with the arguments offered by Hoffman, as by Crenshaw and LaFree. So Sageman refers to 'a great inflation of the terrorist threat to the United States, resulting in popular hysteria that leads to calls to abrogate civil liberties of suspect populations and demands to kill hundreds or thousands of innocent Muslims abroad' (21). Fair enough, but I doubt that there would be much dispute regarding this point from Georgetown, Stanford or Maryland, to be honest.

Sageman's insights in this book, as in his previous works too,[2] offer much that is of value. The approach is at times somewhat over-stated but, despite this, the book contains valuable reflections. There is statistical analysis of recent terrorist plots against the West, and interview-based recognition of the vital point that many terrorists see themselves as 'soldiers defending their endangered community' (71). There is also much sure-footed assessment of other aspects of terrorism: 'the empirical literature in the field shows that terrorists come from a variety of backgrounds and the vast majority have no criminal history'; 'scholars have reached a consensus that terrorists generally do not suffer from any major mental illness and have failed to discover a "terrorist personality"' (93). If all journalists absorbed these points, then public awareness regarding terrorism would be richly improved.

Sageman offers what he terms 'A Model of the Turn to Political Violence' (111) and, while I tend to agree with what he suggests, I felt that many scholars who have studied terrorist organizations over many years would feel that there was little that is truly novel in his argument here. The process, as set out by Sageman, involves "the activation of a politicized social identity, which generates an imagined political protest community"; "escalating conflict with an out-group (often the state), disillusionment with peaceful protest, and moral outrage at out-group aggression" (117), and the activation of a martial social identity. This is all persuasive. But it is also a pattern deeply familiar from the vast literature on terrorism in Spain, Israel/Palestine, Ireland, Germany and elsewhere.

Any such models – and, as I say, I rather sympathize with the essence of this one – only makes fullest sense when understood in context. The complex particularity of each (ultimately unique) setting,

[2] M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

and the assessment of contingent change and continuity over long periods of the past, offer a powerful way of appreciating the dynamics of terrorist causation, sustenance and conclusion.[3] Much of the terrorism analysed by Crenshaw, LaFree, Hoffman and Sageman alike has Middle Eastern roots, and one of the sharpest-eyed scholars to assess the dynamics which have generated it is UCLA's Professor James Gelvin. The fourth edition of *The Modern Middle East: A History* provides extraordinarily thoughtful reflections on the deeper roots behind much of the violence on which contemporary terrorism studies focuses. The book is intellectually ambitious, aiming to offer 'a reconceptualization of the trajectory of the history of the modern Middle East' (ix). The work opens with the 2010 self-immolation which triggered the Arab uprisings and so the approach, despite the book's historical depth, remains one that has an eye to the pressingly imminent. Gelvin's book is based on the conviction that one cannot understand the early-twenty-first-century Middle East without, at least, going back to the sixteenth century; he also holds (equally persuasively, in my view) that readings of the region which interpret it as occurring outside the developments of other areas of the world are unhelpful: 'historians specializing in the Middle East certainly have a story to tell, but it is a global story told in a local vernacular' (5). How many articles on contemporary terrorism would possess a richer and more serious quality if they adopted such a perspective?

Gelvin suggests that the eighteenth century decisively changed the Middle East owing to two global developments: the emergence of a world economy and the birth of the nation-state system. The combination of these two epochal transformations produced lasting power-relations, and inheritances which have enduringly shaped the Middle East's politics and its economic relationships internally and externally. Part of this involved the way in which 'the Middle East was one of the places where the competition among European states played itself out' (44). It may be unpopular to remind people of this on Fox News but, without appreciating the inheritances of such imperial relationships, little in the contemporary Middle East (its borders, its fractures, its economic relationships, its frequently Fanonist rage) makes good sense. Gelvin himself is brutally honest: sectarianism within the Islamic Middle East owes far less to anything inherent within Islam, than it does to the legacies of formal and informal imperialism; moreover, 'imperial blundering' (105) continues to occur, as with the twenty-first-century US-Iraq fiasco.

The referencing system adopted in the book by Oxford University Press is sometimes less than helpful. Yet the book's importance and its depth of scholarship are unquestionable. Much of the story that Gelvin tells reinforces scepticism about historical inevitability; the Palestinian palimpsest that he carefully paints provides one example, with contingent and complex developments abounding. And, while there is nothing inevitable about the continued role of the state as the unit of power within the region, Gelvin's long-rooted historical intuition is that the nation-state in the Middle East has some long life in it yet. In tune with this, he is critical of those politicians who have exaggerated the threat posed by ISIS: a point on which one can imagine Professors Crenshaw, LaFree, Hoffman and Sageman (for all their differences of approach) nodding in agreement.

References

Martha Crenshaw and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2017)

Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017 edn)

Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017)

James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 edn)

[3] On the distinctive value of history as a means towards understanding terrorism, see R. English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 17-30.