

BOOK REVIEW

Boaz Ganor, 2015. Global Alert. The Rationality of Modern Islamist Terrorism and the Challenge to the Liberal Democratic World, Columbia University Press, USA, 218 pages, ISBN: 978-0-231-17212-7

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Terror has a long and varied history. Its use as a political, psychological weapon is identifiable in many premodern cases. Even as premodern cultures offer great insights into its dynamics, it is the rise of modernity which has truly enabled the manifold aspects of terrorism to flourish. From the influence of state terror, to the terrorism practiced by individuals and heterodox movements coming from different political and religious traditions, terrorism has thrived along with the rise and expansion of modernity. Perhaps its greatest challenge today lies in the terrorism of Islamist Jihadism and its possible effects. In his book, *Global Alert. The Rationality of Modern Islamist Terrorism and the Challenge of the Liberal Democratic World*, the counter-terrorism expert Boaz Ganor approaches some of the most important aspects and strategies used by such groups in manipulating supportive civilian populations on one hand, and in exploiting Western liberal values on the other. Ganor points from the onset of his work to the importance of understanding the perspective of terrorists, particularly when it comes to decision makers which are steeped in liberal democratic values (p. Xii). Indeed, this is an important recurrent argument throughout the eleven chapters of the book and an essential perspective in itself. As the very title of the work states, yet one more important aspect of Ganor's book is his insistence that terrorism is not the work of irrational actors. On the contrary, he persuasively points to the rationality of the root causes and of the instrumental causes which can be encountered in such cases. Ganor proposes his own definition of terrorism as 'a type of political violence in which a non-state actor makes deliberate use of violence against civilians to achieve political (national, socioeconomic, ideological, or religious) ends. The intrinsic nature of modern terrorism as a

violent political act is what makes it far more dangerous than simple criminal activity. [...] That terrorists are sometimes motivated by an altruistic ideology, and not by earthly desires, 2 only emboldens them to risk or even sacrifice their lives, making them more dangerous than other criminals.' (p. 8). The first chapter offers a historical perspective on modern terrorism and the way in which terrorists may interpret liberal democratic governance. The second chapter describes how terrorist movement may exploit the freedoms and self-restrictions encountered in liberal democracy, which, in turn, leads to the dilemma of preserving democratic freedoms while establishing effective counter-terrorism strategies. This dilemma and its possible solution is expanded upon in chapter 3, which redefines state and non-state actors and combatants, whilst offering a proposed 'proportionality equation'. Chapter 4 deals with state support for terrorism, using Iran and its support for Hezbollah and for other Islamist groups as an example. Chapter 5 focuses on the transformation of a terrorist organization from a 'classic' to a 'hybrid' form, which thrives in several spheres of activity, ranging from social, to political. In turn, the sixth chapter deals with the interaction between liberal democracy and modern terrorism, asking if and how liberal democracy can be considered the solution to the problem of terrorism. Chapters 7 and 8 detail the rationality of terrorist organizations as well as the root and instrumental causes and goals in Islamist terrorism. In turn, chapters 9 and 10 aim to show why a terrorist organization may choose a certain tactic, while also pointing to the adaptability of such movements - with Hamas used as a case in point. Lastly, chapter 11 represents a summary of the main points of the book and makes recommendations for theorists as well as for decision makers. Throughout this work, Ganor makes a series of important arguments, particularly when it comes to the way in which terrorist groups interpret and interact with the principles of liberal democratic societies. Whereas jihadists eagerly exploit Western democracy, their ideologues may easily accuse it of shirk (polytheism), a distraction from the true path for Muslims, that of shari'a (p. 15-16). In pitting divine laws against laws which are man-made, such perspectives necessarily distance themselves from a secular Europe, whose creations (socialism and democracy) are at odds with a threatened Islam. Ganor points to eight traits associated with the strategies which can be used by Western states in successfully confronting terrorism. These range from distinguishing between root causes and instrumental motivations of terrorism, to recognizing the possible problems encountered in the liberal-democratic and democratic-governance dilemma, or to the formulation of a successful counter-terrorism doctrine encompassing operative, mediapropaganda, and legal efforts (p. 178-

180).³ The liberal-democratic and democratic-governance dilemma in particular offer the opportunity to address the issues and challenges provoked by terrorism in a democratic state. As Ganor puts it, the democratic-governance dilemma is marked by the need of decision makers to satisfy citizens' need for security following a terrorist attack, while preserving the sovereignty of the government (p. 34-35). Thus, this dilemma is 'a challenge to find the right balance among gaining the people's trust, maintaining legitimacy, and preserving the ability to govern.' (p. 35). In turn, the liberal-democratic dilemma serves the purposes of terrorists, for "the more inclined a decision maker is to safeguard his state's liberal democratic values, the larger the berth given the terrorist." (p. 35). At the same time, a compromise on liberal democratic values in order to fight terrorism seemingly reinforces the terrorist claim that they are fighting an immoral and illegitimate regime (p. 35). In comparison to Western understanding and logic, Ganor describes the cases of individuals for whom death is not only a willing possibility, but 'for whom death is the highest aspiration.' (p. 24). The gulf which separates such a vision from that of Western decision makers cannot be overstated. This is why, as Ganor argues, it is all the more important to understand the rationale behind the terrorist decision-making process and identify the threat posed by hybrid terrorist groups. Moreover, whereas the West typically describes terrorists as absolutely immoral, the terrorists themselves often place strong emphasis precisely on morality and virtue, which is why cracking their moral code can play a strong part in clarifying its decision-making processes (p. 110). Ganor's book is undoubtedly an important addition to the global literature on terrorism. Its usefulness is mainly found in the way it underlines the importance of understanding the distinct rationality of terrorist organizations, whilst pointing to the possible weaknesses of liberal democratic states in their interactions with such movements, particularly when faced with hybrid terrorist groups. Thus, the book can be considered essential reading for academics, security experts, and decision makers. Lastly, in a world marked by the global retreat of the liberal democratic model, and by the expansion of Islamist terrorism and militancy, Ganor's recommendations for possible strategies which can be undertaken by democratic states are relevant and, perhaps, more timely than ever.

