

BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jespersen, Thomas Maguire, and Emily Winterbotham, 2018. *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development. New Challenges, New Responses*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 100 pages, ISBN: 978-3-319-51484-0

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The focus of this edited volume is on a number of important themes for the contemporary security environment, linking, as is evident already in the title, conflict, violent extremism, and development. Choosing to deal primarily with the Global South, the book argues that the contemporary period is facing an unprecedented threat with regards to terrorism and violent extremism. Moreover, the work points to what such developments entail for international development actors which are active in regions dominated by conflict and instability, as well as investigating the extent to which violent extremist groups, such as militant Islamists, can be considered qualitatively different from other conflict actors. As a result, the book seeks to identify the differences between militant Islamists and other conflict actors, as well as portraying the challenges they pose and the solutions through which they may be addressed. The theoretical questions are combined with three case studies, dealing with Kenya, Nigeria and Syria/Iraq.

The first chapter, appropriately named “Theories and Evidence”, focuses on the causes of violent extremism in conflicts and discusses the viability of seeing Islamist extremism as part of a new wave of religious terrorism – a point which it

disagrees with. The chapter includes a discussion on the importance of ideology for extremism, which is rightly understood to play a decisive role in the formation and staying power of such movements, as “even the most locally focused Islamist groups have a vision for a purer, more authentic religious society”, which can be associated with utopianism and a spiritual calling to purify an imperfect, unjust world (p.7). Thus, the authors are right to state that distinctions should not be made between “political”, “nationalist” and ideological groups, but between different kinds of ideological groups (p.7). The diverse range of interpretations and factions competing for influence within the Salafi-Jihadi spectrum are also discussed, with “battlefield jurisprudence” causing change in Islamist groups (p.15). The chapter also argues that the main difference separating Salafi-Jihadism from other terrorist groups and conflict actors is its attitude to conflict, which, the authors argue, represents an aim in itself instead of the means to reaching a desired end (pp.20-21).

In the following chapters, the authors test their hypotheses in situations with the relevant conflict actors along a spectrum which builds upon but expands Piazza’s typology, which categorises Islamist groups as being strategic or universalist. The authors follow in this spectrum, ranging from strategic groups to “cosmic” groups, acknowledging that the former represent actors one can negotiate with, in contrast to the latter (p.19). Nonetheless, their case studies point to a far more complex reality than this particular spectrum. If the dynamics of the Kenyan case represents a mostly local affair involving Somalia (pp.35-46), this turns more complicated in the Nigerian case (pp.47-56) and particularly so in the Iraqi-Syrian case (pp.57-68), with the work linking all three cases to governance failures and political, social, and economic grievances (pp.70-71). And if some of the details have since become outdated, with battlefields and movements constantly and sometimes swiftly evolving, the three chapters mostly achieve the book’s purpose in this regard. Perhaps most importantly, the complexity of the cases discussed affects the implications of these findings for the non-coercive approach which has been called “countering violent extremism” (CVE) – programs which have greatly expanded in recent years – and which is different from the admittedly harsher approaches of counter-terrorism.

The CVE strategies are seen as theoretically playing a role in addressing further radicalisation in countries where violent extremism is part of a wider conflict, yet the authors are aware of existing limits to this potential (p.77). Thus, strategies which are “contextually specific and which engage with the dynamics of particular groups” (p.79) – this again leading to the necessity of understanding ideology – are needed if results are to be effective. To this, the work argues for a range of strategies, such as transformative, ameliorative, and preventive (pp.86-87), while claiming, not altogether convincingly, that “ideological work” such as counternarratives may unintentionally fuel the claims of militant groups “to be engaged in a cosmic or global battle by engaging in this type of communication” (p.87). Having said this, the authors are correct to point out problems regarding the credibility of the government as a communicator on theological issues, the risk that this will merely provide a platform for extremist agendas and the insufficient evidence regarding the psychological effect of such strategies (p.87). From the very onset, the authors acknowledge the controversial nature of some of the key terms found in their book, among which one encounters the term “jihad”, which they translate as “legally [Sharia] sanctioned war”, arguing that “its equivalent in Christian/Western thought is Just War” (p. ix). They expand upon this only very briefly in the introductory chapter: “Violent Islamists have, then, effectively extended the semantic scope of *jihad* beyond its traditional jurisprudential meaning of legitimate warfare—more or less equivalent to what in Christian jurisprudence is called Just War theory—in order to legitimise terrorist violence, revolutionary violence and insurgency, while promoting jihad as the ‘sixth pillar’ of Islam or ‘forgotten obligation”, and hence an individual rather than collective duty for Muslims. In other words, Islamist violent extremists have sought to move the boundaries of Islamic legal theory on war” (p.8). This perspective, based upon the works of Brahimi and Van de Voorde, probably deserves a more thorough argumentation, especially seeing that the Just War concept arose and developed under very different circumstances in Christian Europe from the concept of jihad, which – in its interpretation as defence and expansion of Islamdom – forms an essential part already during the first Muslim generation.

Certain issues are also found in the portrayal of Salafi-Jihadism as focussed less on winning and more on sustaining conflict, which, granted, does benefit such organisations. Nonetheless, the ultimate aims of Salafi-Jihadist movements, while characteristically totalistic and often utopian, are nevertheless consistently pursued. Indeed, for a number of groups such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (formerly Jabhat al Nusra) and Islamic State the ideal of founding an emirate, or even a caliphate, forms a clear aim towards which the act of fighting itself is directed – something which is recognised by the authors themselves in the tables describing these movements (pp. 29-30). At the same time, despite its short length, the book manages to include a number of important and useful works on the topic. Lastly, in recognising that there is no single path to combating the influence and peril of violent Islamism, the book makes for a welcome addition to research in the field.