

## Review – Terrorism: The Power of Weakness and Fear

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# Review – Terrorism: The Power of Weakness and Fear

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NICK BROOKE, JUL 13 2023

### **Terrorism: The Power and Weakness of Fear**

**By Juan Romero**

**Routledge, 2022**

For as long as scholars have been studying terrorism, there has been a struggle to find an agreeable definition of the term to unify the field. Scholars have examined the sheer breadth of definitions that have emerged from practitioners, state agencies, researchers and legal texts to capture the nature of terrorism, and reflected on whether a consensus definition can (or should) be achieved (Schmid 2004, Weinberg et al. 2004, Ramsay 2015, Stampnitzky 2017). One scholar, Alex Schmid (2011, p.74) has identified the most common components present in the multitude of different definitions and the third most common element of these definitions is 'fear or terror'.

Fear, or the creation of fear, is what gives terrorist violence its influential power. The belief that any one individual may be victimised, or that society will continue to face violence is intended to shape the behaviour of the intended target. Given its centrality to the phenomenon of terrorism, fear is a topic worthy of further study in the academic literature on terrorism, and Juan Romero's *Terrorism: the Power and Weakness of Fear* does just that, in an impressively wide-reaching study of how terroristic movements have utilised fear throughout history, how they have attempted to communicate their threat, and how these movements themselves can inadvertently communicate their own fears to a general audience. This latter focus, on the fears experienced by terrorist groups, their propagandists and leaders, is a fascinating and novel insight for those studying terrorism and political violence.

Romero starts the text by arguing that terrorism is an 'ancient phenomenon which still besets many societies' (p.1), and accordingly, takes a historically-minded approach in his survey of the power of fear and how terrorist groups strategically apply it. His study engages with a range of actors throughout history from the Sicarii, the Isma'ili Nizaris and the Sunni Muhawwid, to the Nazi regime in Germany, the Algeria GIA and the Islamic State. This broad approach allows the author to draw out a range of comparative insights about the continuities in terrorist strategy, as well as the subtle changes throughout history.

The choice to invoke Nazi Germany as a case study may (to some) be surprising in a text about terrorism, especially to those that feel the label of terrorism is an ill-suited framework for studying state violence. But its inclusion in this text allows the author to highlight how actors with the full control of the state apparatus can utilise and communicate fear on a greater scale. By avoiding the narrow state/non-state distinction, this decision enables Romero to widen the potential pool of comparative insights.

To accomplish this, Romero takes a methodologically diverse approach, drawing on existing scholarship, archival materials, religious scripture, and modern terrorist propaganda. The sheer breadth of materials analysed in the preparation of this text is impressive. From these documents, Romero outlines linguistic patterns, and focuses on the importance of rhetoric in a detailed reflection on the nature and failings of propaganda. The text, in its approach, focuses on propaganda in two forms: the 'propaganda of the deed' and propaganda of the word.

Earlier chapters of the text focus in on the propaganda of the deed – studying the actions of the Sicarii and other pre-modern terroristic entities, as well as Russian groups such as *Narodnaya Volya*, and the state's response to their

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revolutionary attempts. Throughout this section, the text reflects on the strategy employed in creating fear for revolutionary means, and the role of ideology in shaping the actions of these movements, and highlights the similarities between the Russian revolutionaries and their state opponents.

As the text progresses, it identifies the turn from the propaganda of the deed to the power of the word (or both). The examination of the Nazi Party's approach to propaganda sets the stage for later discussions of how contemporary terrorist groups utilise voice, word and Tweet, but more importantly sets out a framework for understanding how propagandists so often betray their own fears. One of the key insights that Romero draws out of the discussion of propaganda is the extent to which the authors and users of propaganda overestimate the power and value of propaganda, and come to believe that propaganda is a type of 'miracle weapon' (p.75).

The examination of the Nazi regime's use of propaganda does touch on the topic of religion, but highlights how the 'doctrine of the Volk' became the 'new religion' in Germany (p.76), and thus much of this section considers how propaganda and ideology become intertwined. This discussion sets up an interesting comparative examination of how militant Islamist groups utilise religious texts and scripture to justify their use of fear and violence. As Romero highlights, the creation of fear 'is not only about physical fighting' (p.126) and requires an effective media and propaganda approach.

A core thread throughout the focus on propaganda is the extent to which the message must be believable, authentic and effective. Again, through comparative study of two cases, the author draws out the ways in which ideologues have attempted to draw on the authority of established figures or external authorities to provide the veneer of authenticity. Romero notes the use of foreign news sources (p.106) or 'prominent scientists and cultural luminaries' (p.268) by the Nazi party, and 'renowned religious scholars' (p.268) by Islamist militants in their attempt to elevate the authenticity of their message by affiliating it with these established authorities.

These reflections bring the text to a discussion of Al Qaeda and Da'ish (or the Islamic State) and their approaches to propaganda. Few terrorist organisations in recent decades have been as successful at developing an effective media strategy as Islamic State, utilising a polylingual approach (p.127) as well as slick Hollywood visuals (p.128) to appeal to a range of young audiences and potential recruits. Yet, as Romero notes, much of what Da'ish would later achieve owed to novel aspects pioneered by Al Qaeda, including the first publications that were distributed during the conflict in Afghanistan (p.164).

Both groups (and their media outputs) are studied to identify the tone and narrative of their message, and Romero is able to tease out a series of important insights that support his claim that propaganda is a double-edged sword: the use of 'grisly photos' of the victims of Da'ish may grab attention and shock an audience, but may also challenge the 'rosy image of... life in the Caliphate' (pp.191-192). Likewise, a story that recounts that one woman had 'come out ... and requested us to kill her and not to take her as a slave' (p.212) may have been intended to dispel myths about the intentions of the group, but equally illustrates that the groups' actions gave life to these fears in the first instance.

Romero importantly highlights the ways in which propaganda can occupy a range of spaces, and whilst much scholarly focus is paid to the written word through speeches, communiques, magazines and audio-visual presentations, propaganda can be as effective in seemingly banal parts of everyday life. One instance the text highlights is the use of billboards in certain areas controlled by Da'ish (p.215). In this example, Romero highlights that the imagery and language ('we will triumph despite the worldwide alliance') reflect on the use of air power to target the areas held by Da'ish. Again, the text interprets the fears underpinning this seemingly positive message: that air power is successfully eroding faith in Da'ish and that the group felt the need to try to counter this demoralising effect through propaganda.

Having grappled with the ways in which terrorist organisations attempt to utilise fear, the text ends with a summarising reflection on the range of fears that terrorists may experience, such as infiltration (p.223), division (p.226) and the loss of revenue (p.233). This section is important in solidifying that the purveyors of fear are not immune to it. In identifying the challenges posed by propaganda and the exploitation of fear, Romero hopes also to identify the response: education and the development of critical reasoning. To stand up successfully to the

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propaganda of authoritarian regimes and militant groups, the victims or consumers of propaganda must be able to critically analyse what they read, hear and see. *Terrorism: The Power and Weakness of Fear* is an important addition to the literature on terrorism in its reflection on the double-edged nature of fear as a weapon.

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