

Review - Putting Terrorism in Context

Written by James Lutz

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JAMES LUTZ, APR 28 2015

Putting Terrorism in Context: Lessons from the Global Terrorism Database

By Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller

London: Routledge, 2015

This volume by Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller is designed to provide background on and knowledge of the global terrorism database and how it can be used. The discussions of various facets of the database provide some general background based on the numbers drawn from this database on the level of terrorist activities since 1970. The volume clearly succeeds in the first case in terms of providing information on what kinds of analyses can be accomplished using the database. In terms of putting terrorism into context, it does a good job of doing so, although there are some issues here and there as there would be the case with any volume of this type. Researchers on terrorism rarely agree on a number of important issues in this field of activity.

After a basic introduction to the volume (Chapter 1), the authors do an excellent job of providing an introduction into the global terrorism database and, in effect, suggesting the kinds of research it might be used for (Chapters 2 and 3). They provide just enough history on the collection process and the methods that are used to collect the data on incidents from around the world to alert researchers to possible limitations, which admittedly are not many. They note the effects of relying on media reports where there can be some bias and where there might have been underreporting from earlier years where only some data were collected and where efforts to recapture events from earlier years might be less than totally complete since the original sources for the information are no longer available. They also discuss in various chapters data drawn from the collected material on spatial distributions (Chapter 4), and the types of weapons, targets, and tactics (Chapter 6). The regional breakdown in various chapters on levels of terrorism of different types is also suggestive of what can be accomplished with the database, and the details that they provide will make it much easier for other researchers to use the materials in their own work. There is one important aspect of these comparisons, however, that can be a bit misleading. At times, the authors compare regions in terms of the absolute numbers of incidents or fatalities without regard to the fact that some of the regions are much more populous. Regions with greater populations, all other things being equal, would be expected to have higher numbers of terrorist activities. The same is true when they discuss countries with more terrorism or the cities with the most incidents. These breakdowns can thus present a misleading picture to those just beginning to look into the subject matter.

In discussing terrorism in general and with specifics the authors do an excellent job of dispelling many of the ideas about terrorism that have been current in the media or accepted uncritically by politicians and publics. While many of these clarifications are obvious to those involved in terrorism analysis, they are worth noting, especially for newcomers who are being introduced into the field. For example, the authors make clear such items as the fact that terrorism was higher in the 1970s than in later years and was often concentrated in the United States. Their regional analyses make it clear that terrorism is not restricted to the Middle East. Terrorism is not just a religious phenomenon and not restricted to Islam when it is. International terrorism has not been particularly focused on US interests as has often been thought. A significant portion of terrorist attacks do not result in any fatalities and many more in only one fatality. These and other basic elements of terrorism analysis are very important of the awareness of those new to the field.

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Their discussion of the life spans of terrorist organizations (Chapter 5) is interesting but in some ways incomplete. It is an established fact that most terrorist organizations are short-lived, and most do not even survive for one year. This is worth noting but hardly surprising since terrorism is the weapon of the weak and may even be a weapon of last resort for weak political organizations. As a consequence, it would be most unusual if many groups did not fail quickly. In their discussion the authors note that the long-lasting groups do carry out the most attacks. Of course they do since they are the ones that have been around the longest. There are only 21 groups that have lasted longer than 30 years, and quite naturally they have been amongst the most deadly. This finding is fairly obvious in terms of total number of fatalities, but it is also not a surprising finding since terrorist groups over time tend to escalate in terms of their tactics, causing more fatalities, as they fail to achieve their goals. This discussion that just focuses on length of time in existence misses some possibly important trends that would have been useful for the authors to consider. Further, groups that have appeared in the successor states to the old Soviet Union (Chechen nationalist organizations) or in the former centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe have not yet had the opportunity to reach the 30 year threshold yet they might be among the groups which are more deadly or worthy of analysis. More recent groups in the Middle East or Africa have a similar capability to be active and deadly despite their relative youth in relationship to longer established organizations.

In Chapter 8 the authors consider the distinctions between international and domestic terrorism, which as they note, is becoming an increasingly difficult distinction to make. They do an excellent job of developing two different measures of international type of attacks that demonstrates in another fashion the utility of the database for research. While the vast majority of terrorism is domestic in nature as they note, they are correct in suggesting that international terrorism is likely to have a greater impact since it receives greater media coverage on average. Since terrorism involves a target audience by its very nature, international events can have a greater impact, all other things being equal. One of their more interesting findings is that by one definition of international attack, the international attacks have a slightly lower success rate than domestic attacks with success being defined very broadly as an attack being brought to fruition.

The authors discuss the tactics available to terrorist groups (Chapter 6) as well as the possibility of innovations in these tactics (Chapter 9). The discussion of basic tactics reaffirms the conventional wisdom that bombs are the favorite type of weapon. Suicide attacks have become more frequent but have represented one of the more important tactical innovations. The discussion of innovations also enters into the area of nuclear, biological, chemical, and radiological weapons. They suggest that control of a nuclear weapon might provide an important bargaining counter for a terrorist group. It could be quite important in this regard, but only as long as it were not used. Once used, it is highly unlikely there would be any bargaining potential left. The government response to such an action would be likely to be severe and counterproductive for the terrorist organization and those it seeks to represent. In the final analysis, terrorist groups by and large rely on traditional weapons, although they have been willing to innovate and successful techniques will be copied. Car bombs and improvised explosive devices have spread quickly among groups. It is interesting that the authors did not discuss the hijacking of an Air France flight in 1994 by Algerian dissidents with the intent to crash it into the Eiffel Tower or some other target in Paris as a prelude or example for the 9/11 attacks.

The chapter on counter terrorism (Chapter 10) is an interesting addition to the volume. While it accesses a different database than the Global Terrorism Database it does provide some indications of what can be done via data analysis of responses to attacks by dissidents. One important conclusion that the authors reach is that repression is not a counter-productive strategy. While the evidence suggests that repression does not work with well-established groups, the conclusion ignores the fact that most terrorist groups are quickly discovered and dealt with by the police or security forces, actions which the dissidents would obviously regard as repression.

Chapter 11 provides a summary of the volume and does indeed put terrorism into context. In terms of general context it might have proven useful if the authors had somewhere discussed the idea of leaderless resistance, even if that technique would be difficult or impossible to capture in a database. By its very nature, terrorism inspired from a distance cannot be coded as being part of an organizational effort. It would also have been useful to have a formal bibliography at the end of the volume rather than just references at the end of each chapter

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James M. Lutz is Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne. Lutz's recent research has largely focused on the area of global terrorism, leading him to co-author numerous books with Brenda J. Lutz including *Global Terrorism* (2004; 2008; 2013), *Terrorism in America* (2007), and *Terrorism: Origins and Evolution* (2005).