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# Review of The "New" Terrorism: Myths and Reality

Gabriel Rubin
*Montclair State University*, rubing@montclair.edu

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**Gabriel Rubin,** *Montclair State University*

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*The "New" Terrorism: Myths and Reality* by Thomas R. Mockaitis. 2008. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 142 pp. ISBN 978-0-8047-5970-7; $21.95.

Review by Gabriel Rubin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Montclair State University

Thomas Mockaitis's book represents a quality summation of much of the recent literature on terrorism and al-Qaeda written for a lay audience. The author covers definitions of terrorism, the history of terrorism, the history and motivations of al-Qaeda, and how to combat the present terrorist threat to the United States. From the perspective of a terrorism scholar or professional, Mockaitis does not drill much new ground in his book, save with his surprisingly narrow and intriguing definition of terrorism. This review will begin with Mockaitis's interesting take on who terrorists are and then evaluate the book's other conclusions.

As is well-known, the definition of terrorism and a terrorist group is as slippery as many of the terrorists themselves. Bruce Hoffman famously wrote an entire chapter in the seminal *Inside Terrorism*, where he struggled with defining the term. Hoffman concluded that terrorism is: "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change" (Hoffman 2006: 40). But Hoffman also noted that "virtually any especially abhorrent act of violence perceived as against society … is often labeled 'terrorism'" (Hoffman 2006: 1). Indeed, after the 2007 summer fires in Olympia, Greece, the Greek government considered bringing terror charges against arsonists (See http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/08/27/greece.fires.ap/index.html).

Mockaitis sees "terror" as a tool used by conventional armies, insurgents, criminals, and "terrorists" alike. He thus seeks to find a "functional rather than a theoretical definition of the problem" (Mockaitis 2008: 3). The definition he comes up with cuts out of the equation most groups the United States calls "terrorist." He writes that terrorist groups have Utopian goals that are not up for negotiation, have a transnational or international focus, and employ "indiscriminate violence for its own sake with no larger political or other purpose" (Mockaitis 2008: 7-8, 13).

If terrorists are purposeless killers with Utopian goals that are unwilling to negotiate, then who belongs in the category "terrorist"? Aum Shinrikyo, or Supreme Truth, the Japanese millenarian cult, certainly fits this definition. So does Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Neither AQI nor Al-Qaeda Central seems to be willing to negotiate, and both have committed heinous acts of brazen terror, such as the November 2005 bombing of a wedding in Amman, Jordan. Perhaps the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Popular Front for the Liberation

of Palestine (PFLP) of the 1970s, when the groups were famous for hijacking airplanes, could be deemed terrorists. Then again, these groups clearly had ethnonationalist goals in mind.

Most of the organizations Americans know as terror groups are defined by Mockaitis as insurgent groups. Militant organizations that fit this bill are the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Irish Republican Army. All of these groups have nationalist aspirations, have largely targeted the state power they wish to upend, and have arguably used terror "selectively." Mockaitis states that insurgency is "an organized movement to take over a state from within through a combination of propaganda, guerilla warfare, and terrorism" (Mockaitis 2008: 5). I have heard of Hezbollah and Hamas being called resistance groups, terrorist groups, or even political parties, but never insurgent groups. The LTTE, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), and the IRA may fit more neatly into this definition since they have engaged in more traditional civil wars—albeit while relying heavily on terrorist tactics.

In employing a decidedly narrow definition of terrorism, Mockaitis reopens the thorny subject of how we define the term at all. Is it true that countries simply label their modern enemies terrorists? The epithets volleyed between Israelis and Palestinians, the former calling the latter "terrorists" and the latter accusing the former of "state terror," are a case in point. Mockaitis is right that terror is a tactic that is meant to conjure an emotion. But it is also more than that. Most definitions of terror include wording to the effect that terrorists purposely attack non-combatants and that they do so for political purposes. Further, terror groups are always non-state or quasi-state actors.

Deciphering between terrorists and insurgents may be a harder task than the counterterrorist community cares to admit. Though the difference in terms may sometimes be moot for combating the groups, the label "terrorist" carries with it a message of strong condemnation that should not be taken lightly. Much was made of the U.S.'s labeling of Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a terror group for its activities in Iraq. Hamas has rigorously sought international acceptance, but its placement on terror lists the world over has proven a major hindrance. Counter these examples with those of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan or the Badr Brigade of Iraq, groups that are seen to be insurgents not terrorists and thus have not been subjected to the revulsion reserved for terrorists.

Mockaitis is right to reopen the definitional debate in the field of terrorism studies. Hoffman's definition, encompassing any organization that purposefully employs fear for political purposes, may be too broad. I would like to see a definition that falls between Hoffman's and Mockaitis's. Perhaps terrorists can be defined as non-state actors that purposely commit violence against non-combatants for political purposes. The definition of "non-combatant" would then

have to be wrangled over. (For example, are Israeli civilians who served in the IDF non-combatants?)

The rest of Mockaitis's book provides a strong summation of the recent literature on terrorism. He proposes that resources be used more efficiently in the fight against terror. He believes that counterinsurgency (COIN) techniques should be employed to fight al-Qaeda and that the Global War on Terror has ceased to serve its purpose. The author writes that, "COIN requires a comprehensive strategy to address the economic, social and political causes of terrorist violence. In this strategy winning the hearts and minds of disaffected people improves intelligence gathering, which in turn leads to the more focused use of police and military force against terrorist organizations and networks" (Mockaitis 2008: 125).

Mockaitis further believes that, despite al-Qaeda's success in the late 1990s and early 2000s in its fight against America, there must be, in the words of Ian Lustick, an "attempt at triage in the face of too many possible threats" (Lustick 2006: 96). America is too large a country with too many "soft targets" to protect itself completely. Mockaitis suggests a tripartite approach, consisting of antiterrorism (hardening American vulnerabilities), counterterrorism (conducting offensive operations against terrorists), and consequence management (planning for the aftermath of terror attacks so as to mitigate the consequent damage) to battle the terrorist threat. He ends his book by emphasizing that, "[r]isk and vulnerability are the price of living in a free society" (Mockaitis 2008: 129), a note hit by both Ian Lustick (2006) and John Mueller (2006) in their critiques of the war on terror and the Department of Homeland Security.

Mockaitis's book presents a strong primer to the study of terrorism, particularly for a lay audience. At 142 pages (with notes) it is a quick read full of interesting tidbits on al-Qaeda and combating the terror threat. For scholars of terrorism, such as myself, I suggest reading his first chapter on definitions of terrorism in which Mockaitis brings a welcome new perspective to the debate on how terrorism should be defined.

**References:**

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