

BOOK REVIEW

Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects

By Ekaterina Stepanova¹

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Ekaterina Stepanova's thought-provoking book is a valuable contribution to the ongoing literature in the fields of conflict and contemporary terrorism. Even in the midst of an overwhelming degree of terrorism research and literature, particularly since the September terrorist attacks on American in 2001, critical questions regarding such issues as terrorism and the use of force, ideological patterns of terrorism, and religious movements in terrorism, remain unanswered or inadequately addressed.

Why is terrorism used as an instrument of force in some armed conflict but not in others? Why have the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States fundamentally altered the manner in which the US responds to issues of global security despite the fact that the US has sustained greater losses in previous engagements? Why is terrorism on the rise even though many forms of armed political violence appear to be on the decline or stabilizing? Stepanova addresses these and other important questions in her book. In doing so, she

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employs over ten years of research in the areas of terrorism, political violence, and armed conflict.

This book reflects on two main ideologies of militant groups that make use of terrorism tactics — radical nationalism and religious extremism — and examines the interrelationship between these ideologies and organizational forms of terrorism on regional and transnational levels. Stepanova reasons that, “despite the state's continuing conventional superiority — in terms of power and status — over non-state actors, the critical combination of extremist ideologies and dispersed organizational structures gives terrorist groups many comparative advantages in their confrontation with states” (Stepanova, 2008: vii). The author calls into question our current capacity to deal with the ideological tenets of contemporary terrorism on national and international scales.

The central argument rests on the assertion that mobilizing power of radical nationalism may be an alternative to transnational quasi-religious extremism at the national level (Stepanova, 2008: vii and viii). Subsequently, the author suggests that the central extremist elements in transnational terrorism should combine their nationalist ideological policies with their religious radicalism to further nationalize their operational approach. However, Stepanova's analysis moves beyond simple categories of observation, illustrating the need to adjust our lens of interpretation to see other factors that fuel and impact global terrorism. For example, the argument is made that in complex multi-causal and multi-level armed confrontations it [ethnic violence] is often intimately intertwined with other forms of violence (Stepanova, 2008: 45). The author contends that the very idea that armed violence in an ethno-political form is a kind of anomaly or a pervasive departure from a supposed norm of peace presents a number of important inquiries.

Stepanova explains that the key to understanding why certain radical ethno-nationalists fall on terrorism is the product of international perceptions of terrorism as an excessive and aberrant exemplification of force. “If there are grounds to assert the relative banality of ethno-political violence,” Stepanova argues, “then the main characteristic of terrorism is precisely its *non-banality*, even within the broader cycle of violence” (Stepanova, 2008: 46). Even as Stepanova addresses a broad range of topics within the field of terrorism studies, including terrorism and asymmetry, ideological patterns of terrorism, religious and semi-devout extremism, and the violent Islamic movement, to name a few, sound conclusions about this subject matter cannot be formulated on quantitative data alone. Stepanova emphasizes the use of comparative analysis in terrorism research. For example, comparative dynamics of key indicators — incidents, injuries and fatalities — for religious and nationalist/separatist terrorism at the domestic level over the period 1998–2006 are illustrated in a manner that clearly depicts that, “while in 1998 nationalist/separatist groups accounted for 3.7 times more domestic incidents than religious extremists, in 2006 it accounted for just 1.2 times more” (Stepanova, 2008: 56).

The contents of this work are based on a wide-range and impressive use of data collections, sacred texts, variety of official documents and covenants, theoretical writings, reports, and scholarly books and journal articles. The diversity of her sources is clearly reflected by the chapters found within this book, which should be praised for both its incisive examination and practical recommendations for depriving the trans-national violent Islamic movement of its dangerous ideological potency. In spite of the plethora of strategies and suggestions put forward by analysts and policymakers, Stepanova stresses that, "unless transnational violent Islamism is first nationalized and then transformed in both ideological and organizational terms through its co-optation into the mainstream political process, it is highly unlikely to become amenable to persuasion" (Stepanova, 2008: 164).

Notwithstanding its many thoughtful and unorthodox points of view on the subject matter, Stepanova's book is not without its shortcomings. The author neglects to mention some of the externalities that fuelled and continue to move contemporary global terrorist networks, particularly Iraq — the Bush administration's testing ground for the war on terror, since 2003 — Iran's election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as President in 2005, and Israel's Thirty-Three-Day War against Hezbollah during the summer of 2006. Stepanova also neglects the fact that Islam is subject to a sweeping-range of diverse and often incongruous appropriations that ultimately vie and bid for power over ideological and religious denotation and principles. Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya), Jemaah Islamiah, and the Muslim Brotherhood among others, are discussed in her assessment of global terrorism. However, many national actors, central to the ongoing war against international terrorism, are largely ignored or omitted from this exploration.

By and large, the aforementioned shortcomings do not negatively impact the focus of the Stepanova's work. Rather, this work should be praised for its considerably unique and constructive approach to ideologically neutralizing international terrorist networks, and for the comparative approach exercised from the initial pages.