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### James J. F. Forest: The Terrorism Lectures: A Comprehensive Collection for Students of Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and National Security

W. R. Matchett <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Politics , University of Ulster Jordanstown , Ireland

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# Book Review

W. R. Matchett

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School of Politics, University of Ulster Jordanstown, Ireland

James J. F. Forest: *The Terrorism Lectures: A Comprehensive Collection for Students of Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and National Security* (Santa Ana, CA: Nortia Press, 2012).

Dr. Forest has produced a fine 409-page holistic work on terrorism that contains 19 lectures in five parts: (1) Definitions and Historical Frameworks; (2) Underlying Contexts that Motivate and Facilitate Terrorism; (3) Terrorist Group Ideologies and Strategies; (4) The Worst Weapons of Terrorism; and (5) Concluding Thoughts. As a general study, it works well, providing a taste of a specific topic in each lecture and then directing readers to other detailed works that expand on it. The pejorative nature of studying terrorism is fraught with academic hazard. Argue too strongly one way and you are accused of being a right-wing “securocrat” and, on the other extreme, a left-wing apologist. Obviously conscious of this, Forest states: “The definitional debate has led some to suggest that terrorism should be considered a matter of perception. However, I personally believe that freedom fighters or insurgents can certainly attempt to achieve their political objectives without resorting to violence” (p. 2). In other words, if all democratic options have not been exhausted to resolve a political grievance, then organized violence used in pursuit of promoting that grievance is terrorism. The inherent difficulty, which is why terrorism is such a topical area of study, is that a state or ruling party can be legitimately obstructive in frustrating the prospect of genuine grievances being remedied through the democratic process. Therefore, in my view, expressing his opinion on this issue on the second page exemplifies that Forest has an excellent grasp of a very complex subject, a view corroborated in examining the content thereafter.

The danger with taking on the topic of terrorism in such a wide encompassing format is that it tends to dilute the content, omit important features, or incorrectly generalize—all of which Forest mostly avoids. Some minor exceptions are asserting that it would be difficult to find a “court of law anywhere in the civilized world” that does not view terrorist murders as crimes (p. 4). However, Dublin courts consistently interpreted terrorist acts committed by republicans, most notably the Provisional IRA (PIRA), as political actions and not criminal offenses in regularly refusing extradition requests by the British government. An impassioned plea to Dublin by the father of a young Catholic

teacher shot dead by the PIRA in Belfast is poignant testimony in this respect.<sup>1</sup> Dublin's attitude conveyed a certain amount of co-ethnic sympathy, thereby encouraging the PIRA, most notably in the cross-border element of its terrorist campaign. Multinational forces in Iraq experienced a similar co-ethnic aspect, albeit much more severe, with Syria colluding with Sunni Arab insurgents and Iran with Shia militias. On this point, given that terrorism is such a central feature of insurgency, one would have expected a lecture on insurgency. This is a pity, as Forest touches on how inactions of governments contribute to sustaining terrorism by "not policing a border or turning a blind eye to fundraising" without seeking to fully connect this as a common theme of modern insurgency-based conflicts (p. 70). Equally, the Global Insurgency (GI) is essentially what created the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and, together with irregular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has characterized the modern face of terrorism, producing infamous figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Specific to the causes of Northern Ireland's conflict, Forest's analysis is slightly skewed. Catholic grievances were not as extreme as their politicians claimed and relatively mute when considered in a wider context. Beckett explains that middle-class Catholics who had benefited from improved living standards created a heightened sense of expectation on political reforms. They started antigovernment protests via a supposedly nonsectarian NICRA (Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement). This attracted nationalist groups and resulted in working-class Catholics confronting the police.<sup>2</sup> Social justice issues merged with "armed force" republican ideology, from which the PIRA emerged in December 1969, not 1972 as Forest states (p. 182). Nonetheless, his appraisal of the "Troubles," the initial overreaction of the Security Forces that exacerbated communal tension, the various terrorist factions, and the sectarian nature of the conflict is fairly good.

Several lectures stand out. Foremost of these is "Terrorist Groups as Learning Organizations." Forest conveys the transnational nature of terrorism and that a successful terrorist network is one that is always a step ahead of the response of the state. Indeed, it is amazing to see how quickly terrorist groups in Iraq fed off the top of the PIRA's learning curve in adopting IEDs, VBIEDs, and sophisticated means of detonation, an area Oppenheimer (former US EOD expert) superbly documents.<sup>3</sup> One suspects terrorist networks assimilate this knowledge quicker than their counterterrorist equivalents, especially in the modern technological age, an area Forest also covers in an excellent lecture on "Media and the Internet."

A lecture on "Al-Qaeda: History and Evolution" is another good piece. It touches on bin Laden's rationale for 9/11 that he viewed the US as weak in Beirut (1983 bombing by Islamic Jihad against the USMC) and Somalia (1993 battle of Mogadishu, Blackhawk Down), having vacated each location after sustaining casualties in terrorist attacks. Therefore, an attack on the continental US, in bin Laden's eyes, would achieve the same result. The Saudi

obviously overlooked or underestimated the significance of the US response to Pearl Harbor! It is a discussion that would have benefited from considering Peter Bergen's interview with bin Laden, wherein the Saudi was encouraged by how the West received "the top official of the Irish Republican Army [Gerry Adams] at the White House as a political leader."<sup>4</sup> Having vilified the PIRA as a terrorist organization, the British (and, by inference, the West) subsequently changed their stance to accommodate a political process, which did not compute with AQ's fundamentalist view of right and wrong not being interchangeable. This undoubtedly reaffirmed bin Laden's belief of a decadent West that was morally bankrupt and easily intimidated. It appears fair to suggest that bin Laden believed a protracted conflict, similar to that of the PIRA, would reap the same political dividend where the contortions every four years of the US electoral system worked in his favor. Assessed from this angle, bin Laden's strategy has some merit. Bergen's outlook aside, Forest insightfully highlights the Achilles' heel of most terrorist groups in concluding that AQ has a "limited influence in the Muslim world," which is why it "uses terrorism in the first place" (p. 304).

Forest also approaches the thorny issue of martyrdom/suicide attacks very well (lecture 16). He uses excellent studies in this area, such as Moghadam, to illustrate that this aspect is anything but mindless or restricted to Islamists.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, he traces the globalization of Salafi-Jihadist ideology to its main characters, such as Qutb, Azzam, Zawahiri, and bin Laden. By doing so, one gets a sense of its historic and contemporary appeal and how extremism exploits the most vulnerable members of society, preys on prejudices, and thrives in conditions of social deprivation. I imagine this is where terrorism will continue to prosper most in the foreseeable future.

Although it is aimed at an audience interested in terrorism studies, it is also a work that would benefit the casual reader. In short, it is a well-written account that covers most of the main basis relevant to terrorism. I enjoyed reading it and have no hesitation in recommending it to others.

## NOTES

1. David McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2008), 981.
2. Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and Their opponents 1750* (London: Routledge, 2001), 219.
3. A. R. Oppenheimer, *IRA the Bombs and the Bullets: A History of Deadly Ingenuity* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), 2009.
4. Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 21.
5. Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.)