



Book Review of Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues

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Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues (5th ed), by Gus Martin, ISBN 978-1-4833-7898-5, Sage Publishing, Inc., 2015, \$88.35.

According to Martin, readers of his newest book “will acquire a solid foundation for understanding the nature of terrorism” (pg. xix). Chapter titles include, *Terrorism: First Impressions (1)*, *Beginnings: The Causes of Terrorism (3)*, *Tools of the Trade: Tactics and Targets of Terrorists (10)*, *The Information Battleground: Terrorist Violence and the Role of the Media (11)*, *The American Case: Terrorism in the United States (12)*, and *Counterterrorism: The Options (13)*. Each chapter is supplemented with discussion questions, recommended websites, web exercises, and suggested readings. Although this is a fifth edition textbook, Martin provides readers with an ample amount of new material. This infusion of new material is essential for those wanting to acquire a better understanding of the evolving nature of terrorism and its many modern manifestations.

“At the outset, it is important to understand that the study of terrorism is, first and foremost, a study in human behavior” (p. xix). Like other major events in history, most of us can recollect where we were when we learnt of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. These “attacks were seen by many as a turning point in the history of political violence” in the Western world (p. 3). It is within Martin’s first chapter that various impressions of terrorism are discussed. A complete understanding of terroristic behaviors requires insight into extremist’s beliefs. Such an understanding hinges on knowledge of how symbolism is used as a recruitment tool to rationalize and justify violence. Induction based upon ideology is crucial to both the enlistment of single participants and to the development of terroristic groups. These groups are often comprised of angry and disenfranchised individuals who have developed expertise in weapons and communications technologies.

What is the motivation behind terrorism? Possible answers to this question are presented in Chapter 3. Explanations include, “political history, government policy, contemporary politics, cultural tensions, ideological trends, economic cycles, individual idiosyncrasies, and other variables” (p. 48). From a psychological standpoint, many terrorists have sustained traumatic events in their lives leading to antisocial behaviors. Additionally, terrorism is often used as a way to establish self-esteem and develop feelings of power and control. Moreover, research reveals that those individuals who grew up in a

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violent area and have relationships with delinquent peers, are more susceptible to terrorist behaviors.

“The terrorist environment today is shaped by advances in technology, information, and transnational interconnectivity” (p. 275). Chapter 10 presents the tactics and targets of recent terror activities. Martin explains that acts of terrorism are seldom senseless or random. Instead, targets are carefully selected and attacks are meticulously planned. “For most terrorists, the minimal objective is increased public recognition for a specific political position. The optimal objective is movement toward achieving their communal, revolutionary, or other political objective” (p. 269). “High-profile, sentimental, or otherwise significant targets are chosen with the expectation that the terrorists’ constituency will be moved toward action, and that the victims’ audience will in some way suffer” (p. 290). That being said, does terrorism really work? Martin answers this question with a definitive “yes”.

Chapter 11 focuses on the relationship between terrorism and the media. “Terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media” (pg. 304). Likewise, the media has become an important tool in helping terrorists convey their message to a worldwide audience (p. 315). The primary objective behind most terrorist acts is to publicize a political message. Media-oriented terrorism, “refers to terrorism that is purposely carried out to attract attention from the media and, consequently, the general public” (p. 306). For example, in 1995 Ted Kaczynski, an American terrorist better known as the Unabomber, specifically courted media attention, stating that he would discontinue his bombing campaign if they would publish his political manifesto (p. 309). Furthermore, on June 14, 1985, terrorists hijacked TWA Flight 847. Over a sixteen day period, hostages were sporadically released as a mechanism to obtain media coverage, and to win support for the terrorists’ cause.

Chapter 12 focuses on terrorism in the United States. Martin explains that, “Prototypical revolutionary organizations began to form in the late 1960s and a few of these groups produced cadres or factions that became terrorist organizations” (p. 336). These groups were responsible for domestic bank robberies, shootings and bombings. The environment changed substantially during the 1990s when America’s national interests began to be targeted by both domestic and international terrorists (p. 364). The attacks on September 11, 2001 have been described as, “one of the worst incidents of modern international terrorism” (p. 365). This event was planned and carried out by Al Qaeda. Martin states that members of Al Qaeda are, “religious terrorists fighting in the name of holy causes against perceived evil emanating from the west” (pg. 365). Overall, around 3,000 individuals lost their lives during this single and highly coordinated attack. Following this event, envelopes containing Anthrax were sent to various political officials. “For the first time in its history, the threat of chemical, biological, and radiological terrorism became a reality in the United States” (p. 366) emanating simultaneously from both homegrown and international groups.

Chapter 13 focuses on counterterrorism and, “policy options for responding to acts of political violence” (p. 375). Acts of terrorism are primarily handled through hard-line and soft-line responses. Hard-line responses “include using military and paramilitary measures to punish or destroy terrorist” (p. 375). Likewise, soft-line responses “incorporate diplomacy, compromise, and social reforms as possible options” (p. 375). The use of suppression campaigns, special operations forces, nonviolent covert operations,

intelligence, negotiations, and target hardening and technology, are also tactics widely used to prevent terrorism. For example, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 which used many of these techniques in hopes of “degrading or destroying the operational capabilities of international terrorist” (p. 380).

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, awareness and tactics designed to disrupt and prevent acts of politically-motivated violence have greatly increased. Advances in technology have aided in the understanding of pro-terror sub-cultures. Technological advances and enhanced security procedures, including those used in airports, have become the new normal. Understanding and recognizing terrorist behaviors helps to ensure that history will not tragically repeat itself. While in its fifth edition, Martin’s textbook is comprised of timely and essential information that aids in the understanding of political violence. I highly recommend *Understanding Terrorism* because of its abundance of information, easy to follow format, real life examples, and its bounty of charts and graphs. Additionally, I believe readers will find the contents of Martin’s text incredibly interesting and informative. Its reading will facilitate an understanding of the many facets of politically-inspired violence. It is the quintessential manual on terrorism.