

## Review Essay 105

Richard English. *Does Counter-Terrorism Work?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780192843340.

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Richard English's concise, compelling book offers a nuanced response to the titular question and a nice follow-up to his previous work on the efficacy of terrorism.<sup>2</sup> The book intervenes in the broader scholarship on modern terrorism by offering a comparative framework for thinking about what counter-terrorism success looks like and how best to achieve it, using case studies of the US War on Terror, Israel-Palestine, and Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

English's best insight is that it is "reactions to non-state terrorism rather than acts of terrorism themselves that have most decisively changed the world. In that sense, counter-terrorism is an historically even more important phenomenon than terrorist violence" (1). The US response to 9/11, for example, was more transformative, and possibly more damaging, than the attacks themselves.

This point frames the entire book: counter-terrorist states define the nature and scope of terrorist threats as well as the meaning of success. They can seek full "strategic victory," in which terrorism is reduced to a trivial level, often through the addressing terrorism's roots via a "political resolution" (5, 159). More often success is partial, "in which a state significantly reduces terrorist capacity and lethality, and substantially manages to protect its people" (160). There is also the "tactical level" of success, which means executing successful operations against terrorist groups through lethal force, detentions, prosecutions, and breaking up plots (161).

The first steps toward effective counter-terrorism are realistically defining success and acknowledging that actions at the tactical level might damage strategic progress. English particularly faults Israeli and US

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this review reflect those of the author alone.

<sup>2</sup> Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Some prominent recent works on counter-terrorism include: Silke Zoller, *To Deter and Punish: Global Collaboration Against Terrorism in the 1970s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Daniel Chard, *Nixon's War at Home: The FBI, Leftist Guerrillas, and the Origins of Counterterrorism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America's Long War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

counter-terrorism on these points. The George W. Bush administration defined success expansively during the War on Terror, seeking to achieve regime change and democratization in multiple foreign nations to address terrorism's root causes.<sup>4</sup> It defined possible weapons of mass destruction (WMD) terrorism as an existential threat while portraying radical Islamism as a successor to Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Actions like the 2003 invasion of Iraq or the drone strike program may have achieved operational successes but probably set back counter-terrorism on a strategic level by undermining US credibility, alienating partners, and fueling extremism.

Counter-terrorists must also “avoid giving gifts to terrorists,” including excessive uses of force that neutralize some threats but feed terrorist recruiting (166). Moral and legal restraints on terrorism are not just nice things to have; they are essential to good strategy and to the battle of narratives. On the flip side, counter-terrorists should “use the gifts that terrorists give to the state” by highlighting indiscriminate violence and extremism that alienate normal people (170). They must also enlist allies who can speak credibly to the grievances of alienated communities and guide people toward non-violent means of pursuing their goals.

Where possible, counter-terrorism should include “a wider political approach to the relevant root causes” (171). As English evocatively puts it: “Terrorism is a blood-stained symptom of the more important issues at stake,” which are usually political or religious (171).

England uses the Northern Ireland case to show how counterterrorism can be successful “through a combination of peace-process politics and effective counter-terrorist violence” (74). British intelligence operations infiltrated the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (PIRA) ranks, prevented attacks, sowed dissension, and ultimately convinced key republican leaders that they would not achieve their goals with violence.<sup>5</sup> In particular, PIRA leaders accepted the “consent principle” (citation), which established that Northern Ireland's status as either part of Ireland or the United Kingdom would change only with the consent of the majority of its people, not as a result of violent revolution (82).

At the same time, Great Britain opened a political process that addressed crucial Catholic and Protestant grievances. The resulting 1998 Good Friday Agreement isolated extremists, established power-sharing agreements, and enabled intra-communal disputes to be worked out within an ongoing political framework. English quotes one PIRA member saying that in the 1970s “I genuinely believed that one day the IRA would be chasing the British Army down to the docks, firing at them, and the last British officer would be backing up the gangway onto the boat with his pistol in his hand” (83). Convincing the majority of the PIRA to abandon the armed struggle required both effective and legally restrained counter-terrorism tactics and the opening of the political process.

Rather than drawing correlations from massive data sets, English takes a historian's approach by respecting “the complex particularity of each individual context” (9). This methodology strengthens the book by

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<sup>4</sup> On the Bush administration's transformative agenda for the War on Terror, see: Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005); Jacob Heilbrun, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2012).

obliging the reader to avoid easy answers and appreciate the different situations of each case. His chapters on Northern Ireland are particularly adroit in this regard. This is his success case, but he carefully avoids arguing that it can be replicated anywhere.

It is unclear, for instance, what a political process with a group like Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State would look like given their radical, even cosmic goals and willingness to inflict mass casualties. Groups like the PIRA, in contrast, did not seek to kill thousands and had more discrete goals, namely a unified Ireland. Still, extremist groups often have political roots that can be addressed through political processes. The Islamic State, for instance, gained momentum in large part because of Sunni alienation from the Shia dominated government in Iraq, which included arbitrary detentions and massacres of peaceful Shia protestors.<sup>6</sup>

Two mild critiques are in order. First, the organization is odd in that English does not provide his thesis until the conclusion, which leaves the reader wondering about the full argument until the end. A little front-loading would have addressed this issue. Second, more attention to the political side of counter-terrorism may have sharpened the overall analysis. English is right that terrorism is almost never an existential problem and that “learning to live with and to contain terrorism, rather than pledging to eradicate it” is usually necessary (163). Why, then, do counter-terrorists struggle to do this? Why does terrorism *feel* existential to both leaders and ordinary citizens? In the War on Terror, the United States overextended itself based on worst-case scenario thinking, emotional reactions, cultural anxieties about decline and decadence, and an overly homogenous definition of the threat.<sup>7</sup> US leaders felt personally responsible for stopping the next attack, and believed that future large-scale incidents would doom them politically.

Keeping counterterrorism campaigns within moral, legal, and strategic limits is worthwhile, but doing so requires tackling the political, emotional, and cultural roots of overreaction more directly. A section on these dilemmas would have made this already strong book even more valuable.

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<sup>6</sup> Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015); Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> On cultural anxieties and the War on Terror, see: Joseph Stieb, “Moral Clarity: Terrorism, the Culture Wars, and Modern U.S. Conservatism,” *Diplomatic History* 46: 4 (September 2022): 728-754.