

Terrorism and American Foreign Policy

Reviewed by J. Daniel Moore

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Paul R. Pillar. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001. 235 pages.

Paul Pillar's *Terrorism and American Foreign Policy* is a timely contribution to the public policy debate on how the US foreign policy establishment should respond to terrorism, particularly Islamic extremism. Published only months before the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, this persuasive, policy-oriented primer by the former deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center is a valuable resource for policymakers and scholars. The book was produced during Pillar's 1999-2000 sabbatical as a Federal Executive Fellow in the Policy Studies program of the Brookings Institution.

The most topical of the book's sections analyzes the roots of Islamic resentment of the United States and argues that there is little that Washington can do to lower its profile as a terrorist target. The end of the Cold War marked the emergence of numerous ethnic and sectarian conflicts. As secular leftist terrorism waned with the decline of Soviet Union, Iran's revolutionary fervor popularized hatred of the United States and its policies in the Islamic world. The Afghan war provided terrorist skills and military experience to large numbers of "Arab Afghans,"

facilitated Islamic extremist networking opportunities, and taught the mujahedin that violence and adherence to dogmatic Islam could humble superpowers. By the mid-1990s, a powerful, aggressive Islamic terrorism had evolved, made more lethal by globalization. US Middle East policy, particularly Washington's close ties to Israel, contributed to the targeting of America by Islamic terrorists, as did America's power and perceived arrogance, US dominance of global media, and the physical exposure of US symbols of power, such as US embassies and the World Trade Center.

According to Pillar, extremists share a perception that American culture has polluted Islamic values and traditions. They view violence as the natural and justified by-product of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Outrage and unyielding religious beliefs provide moral sanction to use violence against the intrusion of a godless West, symbolized by America, into the Middle East.

The United States cannot avoid terrorism simply by pulling back from the Middle East, Pillar argues. Retrenchment would not serve our foreign policy or security interests. America can do little to change its status in the world. Indeed, the US partnership with Israel—the most frequently voiced complaint by Islamic terrorists—moderates Israeli policies and sustains Israel's confidence in its security. Reduction of US support for Israel would not reduce terrorism, and might even encourage it.

The author proposes a US counterterrorism strategy that meshes with the larger context of US foreign policy objectives. Counterterrorism policy should be designed as but one part of a broader effort to maintain national security and should be integrated into all foreign policy decisionmaking. In national security, a good defense relies on an active offense, both unilateral and multilateral. The author argues that close cooperation with foreign intelligence services constitutes our most important and effective tool, by expanding the intelligence, police, and internal security resources directed against terrorist targets.

Terrorism and American Foreign Policy emphasizes a vigorous multilateral diplomacy, but also identifies some of the downsides. Sanctions work, Pillar says, by imposing a moral authority and adding to the ignominy attached to terrorism. Coordination with authorities in other countries and imprisonment of terrorists serve to discourage terrorism, but do not stop committed terrorists willing to die to achieve their goals. In prosecuting terrorists, however, we risk compromising intelligence sources and methods and increase our dependence on foreign governments. Imposing

financial controls and limitations plays a secondary role in combating terrorism. While they are tools, such controls have the potential to wreak havoc without causing damage to terrorist networks, which camouflage transactions through multiple names, false names, and front organizations outside the United States. Selective military retaliation deters terrorism, demonstrates US resolve, encourages other governments to fight terrorism, and disrupts terrorist operations. Yet, applying military force often requires cooperation from other countries and can arouse popular resentment against the United States abroad. Intelligence collection has foiled terrorist plots, but religious-based terrorist cells operating in near isolation are almost impossible to penetrate.

Pillar notes that American public attitudes toward terrorism have become increasingly hostile over the past two decades. Terrorism is an evil to be extinguished. Public opinion seeks absolute solutions and rejection of accommodation and finesse. Pillar argues, however, that the war against terrorism will not be won outright—it can only be managed. It is more like the Cold War than war in a traditional sense; it will require a patient and persistent effort. Nor will the war on terrorism conclude with a clear victory. Terrorist acts, rare events by definition, cannot be predicted. Increasingly, they seem to depend on sudden, extemporaneous decisions of single individuals or small teams. Because terrorism is a product of complex forces, forecasting it is specious. What we can predict is that terrorism will endure.

The book's policy recommendations have immediate relevance:

- Inject a counterterrorism perspective into all foreign policy decisionmaking.
- Pay attention to the full range of terrorist threats without focusing on any one individual, such as bin Ladin, or any one means of attack.
- Use all available methods to neutralize terrorism, while not relying heavily on any one of them.
- Tailor different policies to meet different terrorist challenges.
- Engage foreign governments in our efforts and inform the American public how it can help to neutralize the threat.

For all his insight, however, Pillar might have underestimated bin Ladin's impact on Islamic terrorism. He argues that bin Ladin is not a unitary and unifying symbol for militant Islam, a view that seems a bit off the mark in a

post-11 September world. The author suggests bin Ladin has fallen short of institutionalizing his influence through alliances across national and ethnic lines and his focus on the hated United States. Islamic terror, in Pillar's view, will not end with bin Ladin's death or capture; nor will it necessarily spell the end of al-Qaida.

Seen through the prism of the 11 September attacks, Pillar's book holds up quite well. In a prescient observation in the foreword, Brookings Institution president Michael Armacost tells us that few events can sear the national consciousness as deeply as a terrorist attack. Based on the reasoned arguments in *Terrorism and American Foreign Policy*, Pillar would argue now that we should respond carefully and deliberately to the expanded terrorist threat against the American people, while upholding our broad foreign policy objectives. But now we are at war. The war against terrorism has become "the" major foreign policy objective, not "an" objective. Pillar suggests that America would be well served by investing time and resources to illuminate the complex social, economic, and religious phenomena of terrorism. Despite the urgency at the moment to defeat bin Ladin and his al-Qaida movement militarily, his advice appears sound as we gear up to combat future terrorism across a broad front.

J. Daniel Moore, is a member of the CIA History Staff.

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.