

I APPROACHED Louise Richardson's acclaimed new book with great expectations. How could one not? Harvard's Stanley Hoffmann and Jessica Stern, noted experts on international relations and terrorism, respectively, both laud *What Terrorists Want* as the single best book on terrorism now available. (Richardson herself is a senior lecturer at Harvard and executive dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.) Alas, *What Terrorists Want* will be disappointing to anyone looking for a convincing causal explanation of terrorism. More generally, the book is analytically lazy and full of inconsistencies.

What Terrorists Want begins, to be fair, with a very smart and useful definition of terrorism, one which helpfully differentiates terrorism from other forms of political violence: "Terrorism simply means deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes" (p. 4). Richardson emphasizes that the "most important defining characteristic of terrorism is the deliberate targeting of civilians. This is what sets terrorism apart from other forms of political violence, even the most proximate form, guerrilla warfare" (p. 6). Moreover, "Victims are chosen either at random or as representative of some larger group. Individual victims are interchangeable... This is different from most other forms of political violence, in which security forces or state representatives are targeted in an effort to reduce the strength of an opponent" (p. 5).

"Terrorist", then, describes a tactic, not a type of state, social movement, organization, or individual. Hence the idiocy, which Richardson recognizes, of the idea of a "war on terrorism". She suggests, however, that "if the primary tactic of an organization is deliberately to target civilians, it deserves to be called a terrorist group, irrespective of the political context in which it operates or the legitimacy of the goals it seeks to achieve" (p. 6). Note Richardson's use of the normative word "deserves" here, as opposed to the more neutral "might" or "could". She seems to embrace the fact that "terrorist" is an epithet. Unlike adjectives that describe, say, a political movement's constituency (e.g., the labor movement or the women's movement) or its goals (e.g., national liberation movements or anti-abortion movements), the word "terrorist" is typically employed to delegitimize – and to delegitimize quite thoroughly – the groups and individuals to whom it is applied.

Given its pejorative connotations, "terrorist" is a label that needs to be used very precisely. Alas, Richardson does not do so. Given her definition of a "terrorist group", one might have expected Richardson to describe a procedure for determining the "primary tactics" of political organizations and

* About Louise RICHARDSON, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York, Random House, 2006).

then to indicate which groups, according to this measure, ought to be called “terrorist” – letting the normative chips of such labeling fall where they may. Such a procedure, which Richardson does *not* in fact provide, could become quite complicated. For example, imagine a political group that assigned 50 of its members and committed a certain amount of money to provide medical services to a civilian community; at the same time, this group secretly assigned ten of its members to carry out violent attacks on a different civilian population, but provided this clandestine cell with substantially more monetary resources than those committed to its medical wing. Is terrorism the “primary tactic” of this group? Would our opinion change if the clandestine cell killed three or 3,000 people? Should we describe the group as “terrorist”?

Unfortunately, Richardson simply ignores these issues and launches into an analysis of various “terrorist groups” without having first established that these groups do (or did) employ terrorism as their primary tactic, according to some reasonable measure. For example, Richardson consistently describes the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and other Republican paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, as terrorist – and the IRA in particular looms quite large in *What Terrorists Want*. (The IRA tried and failed to recruit Richardson when she was a 17-year-old freshman at Trinity College Dublin [p. xv].) Yet little more than a third of those individuals killed by Republican paramilitaries during Northern Ireland’s “Troubles” (between 1969 and 2001) were civilians. A majority of those killed by Republicans were members of one or another security force in Northern Ireland. Moreover, of those civilians killed by Republicans, only about half were “chosen at random” (according to research by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca); many were targeted because of their individual identities or were bystanders, killed by violence that was directed at non-civilians. (The US Pentagon would call the latter fatalities “collateral damage”.) Based on this statistical evidence, indiscriminate attacks on civilians were clearly *not* the “primary tactic” of the IRA. Hence, if we use Richardson’s own definitions of terrorism and terrorist groups, the IRA should *not* be described as a terrorist group. And this is so even if one is not the least concerned that the label has generally been used to delegitimize the IRA and Irish Republicanism *in toto*.

The IRA, alas, is just the tip of this particular iceberg. Without any evidence whatsoever as to their tactical repertoires, Richardson also describes Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Tamil Tigers (Sri Lanka), the Basque nationalist group Euskadi ta Akatasuna (ETA), the Red Brigades (Italy), and myriad other groups as “terrorist”. Yet, as Robert Pape has shown (*Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, Random House, 2005, Appendix I), the overwhelming majority of the suicide bombings carried out by Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers have been aimed at military or political targets, not at random civilians. (As I write, a suicide bomber from the Tamil Tigers has just used a truck filled with explosives to kill more than 90 people. But this was not an act of terrorism – the target was a military

convoy and the vast majority of those killed were navy personnel.) ETA has mainly targeted security forces, politicians, judges, and journalists. And the Red Brigades specialized in targeted killings and kidnappings, not indiscriminate violence.

All of which is to say that Richardson seems to lose sight of her definition of terrorism and very quickly begins to blur the boundary between armed groups that rarely or occasionally use terrorist tactics and those that regularly use such tactics, like the Palestinian group, Hamas, and al-Qaeda. In so doing, she also blurs the boundary between terrorism and political violence more generally – an error commonly made by governments as well as scholars. Not surprisingly, when Richardson turns her attention to the causes of terrorism, the explanation that she ultimately presents is grossly overgeneralized. According to Richardson, “Terrorism is caused by the lethal triple cocktail of personal disaffection, an enabling society, and a legitimizing ideology” (p. 70). She elaborates:

Terrorism needs a sense of alienation from the status quo and a desire to change it. Terrorism needs conditions in which people feel unfairly treated and leaders to make sense of these conditions, to organize a group and make it effective. Terrorism needs an all-encompassing philosophy – a religion or secular ideology – to legitimize violence action [sic], to win recruits to the cause, and to mobilize them for action. Terrorism, to survive and thrive, needs a complicit society, a societal surround sympathetic to its aspirations (p. 69).

Now, this might serve as a very general explanation for collective political violence. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine such violence occurring – or at least persisting for some significant period of time – without disgruntled people who are organized, believe violence is legitimate, and are supported by sympathizers. We might wonder if such an explanation could say more about the conditions under which political violence becomes widely accepted: when and why do “all-encompassing philosophies” that legitimize violence make sense to large numbers of people? But whatever one might make of this explanation, it clearly fails to explain, or even to problematize, what Richardson, as we have seen, calls the “most important defining characteristic of terrorism”, namely, the deliberate targeting of civilians. An adequate theory of terrorism need not explain political violence in general, but it must account for violence directed against random civilians. Richardson’s “triple-cocktail” formula does not provide such a theory.

After discussing the causes of terrorism, Richardson examines more closely the motives of terrorists – an important ingredient of her “triple cocktail”. What *do* terrorists want? What are they fighting for? Richardson’s answer is yet another triad: “the three Rs of revenge, renown, and reaction” (p. xxii). The proximate motives for terrorism, that is, are to retaliate against one’s oppressors, to gain publicity and glory in so doing, and to win concessions or to provoke an overreaction by the government. Richardson suggests that revenge, glory, and provoking some (perhaps any) kind of government reaction are satisfying in their own right and individually suf-

ficient to motivate terrorism. (A coherent vision of the good society, on the other hand, does *not* motivate terrorism according to Richardson. In fact, she thinks terrorist groups have had great difficulty in describing the society they wish to create [p. 87].) If other individuals also take satisfaction in the revenge exacted by terrorism, the glory that its perpetrators attain, or the government reaction it induces, so much the better from the terrorists' point of view.

This account of motives, like Richardson's discussion of the causes of terrorism, is simply too general to account adequately for terrorism. To begin with, winning renown and inducing a reaction by the government can obviously be accomplished nonviolently. Think of Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Even revenge does not necessarily require violence; there are myriad ways to humiliate one's opponent. (And vengeful violence can be directed at soldiers and politicians instead of random civilians.) So the three Rs, by themselves, do not explain the choice of violent means by political groups. Nor do they explain, more specifically, that "most important defining characteristic of terrorism", the deliberate targeting of civilians. Richardson should have asked why certain groups do not just seek revenge in some general sense, but revenge against random civilians. Why do some groups see particular civilians as their enemy? Why do they think they will attain glory by attacking such people (who, after all, are unarmed and unable to defend themselves)? Why do these groups conclude that attacking these civilians – and just *these* civilians – will be advantageous in some way? Unfortunately, Richardson does not address these questions.

If Richardson's big ideas about the causes of and motives behind terrorism are problematic, so too are many of the vignettes and anecdotes that she employs to illustrate her smaller ideas. For example, to underscore the point that even groups that seem to have the angels on their side may engage in terrorism, Richardson claims that the African National Congress (ANC) carried out what "was indisputably a terrorist campaign" (p. 9) in South Africa in the early and mid-1980s. But this claim *is* disputable! Richardson says the ANC was responsible for precisely 13 "terrorist bombings" during a three-week period in 1985, but she provides no source for this claim (in an otherwise well referenced book). The fact is that at no time did the ANC ever advocate indiscriminate violence. The ANC bombings of the 1980s described by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – there is no mention in its multivolume report of the 13 referenced by Richardson – were, with one notable exception, aimed at military targets. The one exception – the bombing of a shopping center – was carried out by an unsupervised ANC operative in contravention of ANC guidelines, and the bombing was quickly denounced by ANC officials. Richardson is certainly right that otherwise decent groups with legitimate reasons to rebel may employ terrorism, but the case of the ANC is not pertinent to this claim.

Even when Richardson gets her facts straight, she often misses the analytic mark. For example, to underscore the point that terrorism is not new,

Richardson describes how Irish nationalists blasted a hole in Clerkenwell Prison in London in 1867 in a botched attempt to free some fellow Fenians; the blast inadvertently killed six people and damaged and destroyed many homes in the adjoining area. But if terrorism is the *deliberate* targeting of civilians, as Richardson tells us, then this incident should not be described as an act of terrorism. Furthermore, to underscore the point that terrorists may come from privileged backgrounds, Richardson provides a capsule biography of Omar Sheikh, the killer of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. (Sheikh attended an expensive private school in England and later studied at the London School of Economics.) But if the victims of terrorism are chosen at random and are interchangeable, as Richardson emphasizes, then it is not clear that Pearl's murder should be described as an act of terrorism. Also, to underscore the point that terrorism often has intertwined religious and political motives, Richardson mentions Yigal Amir's statement that he assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin "on orders from God". Again, if the victims of terrorism are chosen at random and are interchangeable, then Rabin's assassination should not be described as an act of terrorism. (Richardson seems to have forgotten that her definition of terrorism excludes political assassinations.) Richardson is right to note that terrorists do often come from privileged backgrounds and that there are often mixed political and religious motives behind terrorism, but the murders of Pearl and Rabin simply do not bear on these claims.

Richardson's account of the mentality of people who employ terrorism is also problematic, based as it is on contradictory claims. Although she repeatedly asserts that terrorists are not psychopaths and are as rational as you and I some of her comments strongly imply that many terrorists are, basically, idiots. Some examples: according to Richardson, "Terrorists see the world in Manichean, black-and-white terms... They have a highly oversimplified view of the world in which good is pitted against evil and in which their adversaries are to blame for all their woes" (p. 41). Some terrorists, moreover, justify their actions with "the familiar teenage response: 'Everybody does it'" (p. 18). Finally, "There is little correlation between the nature of a grievance and the vehemence of the power for revenge" (p. 94). Perhaps I am misreading this last comment, but Richardson seems to be saying that at least some terrorists are all worked up for no good reason. This sounds like the very definition of irrationality. I suspect, however, that such a conclusion indicates that the analyst has not adequately plumbed the nature of the grievance in question.

In the final chapters of *What Terrorists Want*, Richardson does make some very persuasive points about counterterrorism. She thinks it was a mistake by the Bush administration to declare a "war on terrorism", which in her view cannot possibly be won. Based on the historical record, Richardson understandably fears that attempts to destroy terrorist groups militarily will only breed more terrorists. Such policy views, however, have been circulating in the public sphere for some time, and they are compatible

with a range of (if not all) ideas about terrorism and terrorist groups. One may share these policy views, as I do, without also agreeing with Richardson's causal analysis of terrorism. The two are not tightly linked.

In sum, *What Terrorists Want* is a flawed book. Those searching for a persuasive causal analysis of terrorism will find it especially disappointing. Richardson's own causal theory is, I am afraid, a good example of how *not* to explain terrorism. Richardson's Harvard colleagues may be forgiven for their exaggerations, but this is by no means the best book on terrorism. Not by a long shot. Robert Pape's aforementioned *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, despite its own flaws, and despite its limited focus on the suicidal variant of terrorism, provides a much stronger foundation for constructing an adequate account of terrorism.

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