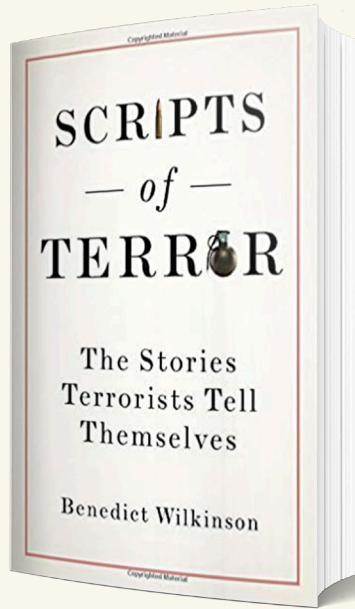




التحالف الإسلامي العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب
ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

BOOK REVIEW 16



SCRIPTS OF TERROR

THE STORIES TERRORISTS TELL THEMSELVES

DR. BENEDICT WILKINSON

August 2020

w w w . i m c t c . o r g



Book Review

Monthly Issue - General Directorate of Planning and Coordination

Director General

Major General Mohammed bin Saeed Al-Moghedi
Secretary-General of the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition

Editor-in-Chief

Ashour Ibrahim Aljuhani
Director of Research and Studies Center

Brought to you by

TAOQ RESEARCH



E-mail: info@taoqresearch.org

Phone: +966 114890124



Book Review

SCRIPTS OF TERROR

THE STORIES TERRORISTS TELL THEMSELVES

This book examines terrorism as a strategic choice that is made carefully and deliberately by fundamentalist actors that carry out violent acts that cause fear and intimidation among all groups of the people. Notoriously, the purpose of such intimidation is to exercise pressure on governments to change their policies and achieve the whims of terrorists. Since terrorism per se is a carefully studied strategy, it is also a mental choice, although its consequences may dance to the tune of reason and logic, and affiliated supporters are rigid and priggish fanatics.

The book charts a series of different strategic scripts at play in terrorist behavior, including survival, mobilization efforts for a grassroots support base, and the grinding attrition of a long terrorist campaign spearheaded by protracted confrontations and battlefields, snowballing beyond the pale. The theme that runs repeatedly across all the organizations is the unbridgeable existing gap between the strategic vision of terrorists and what actually unfolds over the course of time. Regardless of which script terrorists adopt, they often desultorily bungle and fall short of achieving their political ambitions. Yet, despite resounding frequent failure they sustain, they repeatedly use the same strategy; people continue to join such groups, committing mindless acts of violence to regrettably intimidate and stoke fear among safely settled people.

Scripts of Terror, originally submitted as a doctoral thesis, falls into four equal chapters; the three main chapters spell out strategic scripts for terrorist groups in three countries; namely, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Yemen.

Chapter One discusses terrorism as a strategic and rational choice for terrorists to spread and sow violence and intimidate safe people to demand specific political changes. It sets out the concept of each terrorist script which terrorists draw on to make their strategic decisions. Chapter Two investigates the issue of violent fundamentalist Islamist groups operating in Egypt by the end of 1940s. Chapter Three explores the issue of extremist and terrorist groups that sprouted up across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the period of 1998-2007 when AQAP snowballed into the Arabian Peninsula and was later forced to retreat. Chapter Four turns the spotlight on Yemen, drawing a detailed trajectory that marks the rise of the Aden-Abyan Army up to the rise of Ansar Al-Sharia and ISIS in 2012. Yemen is one of the least researched areas among the contemporary case studies, simply because terrorist groups across Yemen have created a new variety of scripts, which have ballooned into a new and unfamiliar challenge for local, regional and international regimes.

The Concluding Chapter presents a set of ideas generated by the case studies under consideration, with a number of strategies that violent extremists have returned to over and over again. The theory and practice through which scripts and strategies should be well understood are elaborated, with a special focus on the existing differences between these key issues. The author also explains that such a disparity is the result of a bias explored in social psychology, widely known as "Narrative Delusion".

ANSWERS PIECED TOGETHER FOR LEADING QUESTIONS

The book pieces together detailed, compelling, truthful and objective answers to key questions under discussion, including, but not limited to, the following leading exploration foci:

- Most terrorist movements, insurgencies and revolutionary groups have failed unequivocally. Why do they doggedly follow the same strategy?
- Terrorists have great ambitions; yet, their capabilities are glaringly limited and poor. What is it that lures them into attempting to achieve their goals?
- Why do terrorists use violent terrorist methods, albeit rarely successful?

LABYRINTH OF TERRORISM

The author painstakingly analyzed what extremists and terrorists do when their choices are limited, or when they have no choices at all. He poses a leading question: Why do extremists choose terrorism? Why do they keep repeating it over and over again? Why do terrorist groups prefer violence over other possible methods? How do they perceive violence as the way to achieve their goals? Will they successfully achieve these goals? The author pieced together compelling and cogent answers based on three case studies in the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Yemen, and analyses of the strategic plans for terrorism executed by violent extremist groups.

Interestingly enough, the author made successful attempts to unravel and unlock the minds of terrorists and understand what they are always trying to do, and why they cling to a deeply-held belief that they will be successful? The author



then concludes that terrorists have a categorical belief, albeit undoubtedly a misconception, that terrorism will heroically achieve their goals and ambitions. This explains why terrorism is not only a stark choice for some terrorists; rather, it is also a foolish and unwise choice. Such a choice is based on flimsy strategic calculations, as the history of terrorists unfolds that they hardly achieve their goals by following their strategic plans and the traditional methods, which they keep implementing repeatedly albeit doomed to an endless series of abject failures.

To this end, the author builds up enormous support for the three case studies through reliable resources, including a set of interviews with a number of diplomats and security leaders who have first-hand knowledge of violent extremist and terrorist groups in the countries under discussion and a number of former members of violent extremist groups, and individuals who have close ties to such extremist and terrorist organizations. This also includes English and Arabic publications of terrorist groups.

TERRORISM AS A STRATEGY

The author highlights that the literature on terrorism suffers from a paucity of relevant research studies that address terrorism as a strategy (Smith and Newman, 2005). However, it is possible to identify the main goals of long-term terrorism, such as

establishing the so-called Caliphate statehood, or expelling colonial powers on the one hand, and short-term goals, such as provoking a government response, or instilling fear, intimidation, or incitement among people on the other hand. The author further explains that after his careful investigation of twenty-eight extremist and terrorist organizations, he finds that the percentage of political goals achieved by terrorism is not more than 7%, and that terrorism has rarely achieved long-term political goals.

THE EIGHT SCRIPTS

Scripts, whether complex or easy, are a major tool in decision-making, as they are ideological experiences that allow decision-making based on the situation, and identify the best actions taken and expected reactions, and provide scenarios and visualizations for the sequence of events and associated possible outcomes, as they are the result of deliberations and thought that require insightful and thoughtful examination. Often scenarios are not limited in number, and strategists can formulate new custom-made scripts to meet their preferences; they may be unrealistic and sometimes absurd, and they may be insightful and meaningful.

The author believes that terrorists also draw on scripts in their calculations and strategic plans, as do other decision-makers in managing crises; terrorists use scripts to test potential action paths, and learn how different actors can respond. The author

examines fourteen active terrorist organizations in three countries over the past sixty years, according to eight scripts in the case studies:

1. Survival: It means to do everything necessary to ensure the continued survival of a given terrorist organization. Although terrorism is greatly described as a strategy for achieving major political goals, this may be difficult and not practically possible. This script may be achieved in either choice: first, terrorist organizations translate their opposition using force and violence; second, terrorist organizations lurk and lie low somewhere until the environment becomes more conducive and favorable to pursue their goals.

2. Gaining Strength: This means that violence be directed internally, and is concerned with the re-acquisition of resources such as money, weapons and fighters as well as the confidence of the general public, rather than achieving goals.

3. Provocation: Terrorist violence leads to a repressive or aggressive government response that does not reward the original act. This would increase public sympathy for terrorists, and reduce the popularity of governments and their apparatus. Through this scrip, terrorist groups force the target governments to choose one of two alternatives: either over-reacting, or not responding; in both cases the result is in favor of a given terrorist organization.

4. Delegitimization: Terrorist organizations force governments to make decisions that should have been avoided, which are often against the unwanted foreign presence on the homeland.

5. Mobilization: This script pays a particular attention to tools and devices, on the one hand, and goals and objectives, on the other hand to strike a balance between the need to obtain resources and the desire to achieve goals and objectives.

6. Attrition: Terrorists who choose this script have access to significant resources, such as key figures of special status, broad financing, substantial military supplies and great political support from moderate actors to carry out a massive long-term campaign and stay confronted with reprisals. The above six scripts are all based on violence, and there are two other scripts that are based on achieving the political goals not drawing on violence and terrorism:

7. Cooperation and Alliances: This script seeks the establishment of strong cooperative relationships

between those whose political goals are identical or similar and whose strategic plans for achieving such goals differ. When all available choices are exhausted or are considered unrealistic and far-fetched, extremist terrorist organizations choose the last script:

8. Demobilization: This script calls for the abolition of mobilization, and the pursuit of political goals by other non-violent means and tools. Under this script, organizations reject violence and distance themselves from their paths, and follow an alternative strategic plan that usually includes the establishment of a non-violent, peaceful political movement or political party.

EGYPT: ESCALATION TRAP

The author examines the case study of Egypt at length and in detail. He remarks that Egypt played a key part in the genesis and development of violent Islamist movements, and the environment of jihad created by the Muslim Brotherhood conceptually and practically is the birthplace of the lesser-known organizations, such as Takfir Wa'l-Hijra, Al-Jihad Al-Islami, and Egyptian Islamic Group. The texts produced by the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and were widely received and perceived as a great impact have inspired and influenced violent groups for many years. The author also reviews the key points made by the two strategists "Newman and Smith", who studied the policy of escalation or alternatively nicknamed "escalation trap", which is another manifestation of the unabridged gap between the strategic vision and strategic action.

STRATEGIC REVIEW

The Islamist Group and the Jihad Group have realized that their adopted plans and scripts have been rendered helpless or inappropriate; therefore, they have reassessed the situation and drawn up alternative strategies and plans. As such, they have had to make one of two possible choices: first, to replace a new strategy that is more violent, and perhaps more feasible, with the old strategic plan; second, to reject violence categorically and adopt non-violence strategies and plans to achieve the desired political ambitions. In this case, both of the aforementioned organizations have adopted a non-violence script to achieve political goals; this script consists of two stages: the first stage is to formulate a compelling and cogent argument that ensures



that non-violence strategies are better and more effective than other strategies based on violence by religious, legal, ideological and political standards. The other stage depends on marketing this ideology among the members of the organization, and convincing the other party – hence the government – that the strategic change is real and true, and that the organization no longer poses a serious threat to the state and the government.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing analysis, we conclude that the general framework of the strategic review process is prepared to communicate this change in a compelling and forthright manner; violence is not only a failed action, it has also made things topsy-turvy against the expected results; yet, political goals generally remain the same and should be pursued and adhered to.

From the author's point of view, the scripts of violent Islamist organizations are glaringly riddled with three flaws. The first flaw is that they have not seen the reality of the existing gap between the means and tools, goals and objectives, and therefore the goals seemingly have sounded possible to realize; while, in reality they have been a form of chimera. The second flaw is that these scripts have oversimplified the complex relationship between

cause and effect. The third flaw is that they have been relatively naive; they are too easy to transfer. This is what has caused the organizations to adopt scripts or parts thereof, which they have doggedly believed they have the ability to adapt successfully to this end. Simply put, the crux of these terrorist organizations in Egypt is that they have copied and mimicked the strategic scripts of others elsewhere, without taking into account the differences in the political, strategic, social, cultural and economic contexts.

SAUDI ARABIA: POSSIBLE ASSUMPTIONS

The author explores how the scripts of terrorist groups have been built in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, how the plotters involved have envisioned that these scripts will help in realizing their desired results and how their strategies and plans have been revealed when put to the test.

The author explains the method in which the attitudes of Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda Leader, and Al-Qaeda in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia changed throughout the 1990s, and how these changes have greatly influenced the Al-Qaeda strategic vision and plans for the Arabian Peninsula. Two contradictory strategic visions have come to surface in the networks of Youssef Al-Eiri and Abdel-Rahim Al-Nashiri, built on flawed assumptions. As for Al-Eiri,



he followed the survival script, and set his strategic vision by adopting the creation of independent cells to recruit young fundamentalist extremists who were enthused but decoyed and disillusioned. As for Al-Nashiri, he adopted the attrition script. Practically, however, there was a big strategic gap between these visions and the method by which they were implemented; both scripts failed not only at the tactical level, but they also obscured and obfuscated the fact that violent cells were glaringly vulnerable and resource-poor, their strategies and plans were helpless to achieve their ambitions both in the long run and the short run.

The “campaign of violence” orchestrated by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula between 2003 and 2005 under the leadership of Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin was also revisited, analyzing the flaws in his three-stage plan and a number of possible assumptions in the scripts made by terrorist extremists.

The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has established a program known as the “Counseling Program” to combat extremism and terrorism, and to rehabilitate and reintegrate extremists into society. The Program is managed by four committees: religious committee, psychological committee, social committee and security committee. The program was highly successful in providing those who were released with commensurate job opportunities,

good housing and sufficient funds. The concerted efforts of the Saudi Government have successfully countered Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

CONCLUSION

Two major strategic shifts have been highlighted: first, the shift of the strategic vision of Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda Leader, towards the US Government; second, rendering the attrition script used in the country of Afghanistan useless, while adopting the provocative script to force the US forces to leave using violence and intimidation.

This strategy was bound to fail miserably simply because it did not well expect the reaction of the other party, confining it to only two scripts: an overpowering response that brings to it domestic and international condemnation and delegitimization, or a poor response that displays the vulnerability of such a party and its inability to confront or control the trajectory of actions. The strategy was based on easy relationships between cause and effect, bringing about its humiliating failure.

YEMEN: DIVERGENT LOYALTIES

In the case of Yemen, the reality of the terrorist organizations and extremist groups is most evident in its most complex cases, as it still has a changing network of leaders, different groups of elements and individuals, identities and attitudes, loyalties and allegiances that are often transient,

ephemeral, constantly changing, uncontrolled and incomprehensible; the elements of these organizations and groups crop up suddenly with various terrorist activities, then they soon retreat or perhaps disappear without a significant effect. The same happened to some violent extremist groups in the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The extremist and terrorist organizations that have emerged in Yemen have suffered from a traditional problem; they had burning and big ambitions with scant resources and limited choices to bridge the existing gap. Unlike those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, violent Yemeni extremists were operating in a country where the regime was much vulnerable and unable to repress these organizations and groups.

The era of violent extremism in Yemen can be seen through two stages of scripts: first, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula adopted the “attrition script”, when the organization used severe central violence against the near and distant enemy in Yemen and beyond in an attempt to force the western power to withdraw from Yemen and to enfeeble the local regime; second, the other stage of the script, which continued simultaneously with the first stage, is the mobilization of supporters by spreading professional oriented propaganda in an attempt to achieve political goals and objectives.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that deradicalization and neutralization of extremism were essentially a means to weaken violent extremist organizations; it is a strategy that aimed at neutralizing leaders and members of Al-Qaeda, delegitimize the ideological foundations of violent extremist groups, rendering their speeches useless, refuting their propaganda, and exposing their deviation, which undoubtedly limits its capabilities and widen the existing gap between its ambitions, resources and goals.

Although Al-Qaeda has re-emerged in Yemen, the de-radicalization program has not been put into action again, in contrast to the indicators shown by the Yemeni Government in 2010 about its intention to revive and pep up the program. In the meantime, violent extremists in Yemen exploited the fragility and

vulnerability rife almost in every corner and is riddled with social and political turmoil and division.

ILLUSION OF TERRORISM

The author highlights the difference between the method in which violent extremists envisioned the development of conditions and the way events have snowballed into reality. The strategic gap is the *raison d'être* of the failure of the terrorist groups under discussion. This gap often arises among such terrorist groups because the scripts often have a problem visualizing the relationship between cause and effect. Establishing new scripts based on understanding the past and interpreting its events and fostering awareness of its variables is not an absolute breeze, as Daniel Cayman puts it succinctly: “We believe that we understand the past, which implies that the future should be unambiguously known as well; yet, in reality we understand the past less than we think”.

SUMMARY

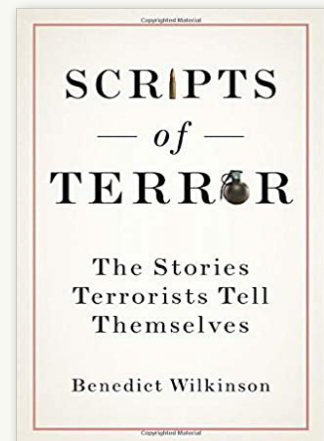
The author explains how terrorism is a strategy and a choice for extremists who believe that it may achieve their goals and objectives, spending much time preparing, reviewing, and examining their strategies and plans, knowing that any simple or disastrous mistake will bring about severe consequences, while also believing they can implement their strategies and plans as desired. Perplexingly enough, a question mark is still hovering at the subject-matter of the book: Why do extremists choose terrorism as their strategy, albeit rarely successful? Well, the author concludes that he posits a different and new theory that clearly explains the answer to this question. This theory is based on some recent developments in behavioral sciences that indicate that rational decision makers are surrounded by a set of biases and contradictions that undermine the rationality of their decisions. Among the most serious and deep-seated prejudices that notoriously affect our judgment is the “narrative delusion”. Simply put, narrative stories become more compelling than facts. In the same vein, Nassim Nicholas explains: “We love stories, we like summarization, we like simplification. We have a propensity for stories at the expense of facts.”

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Benedict Wilkinson is Senior Research Fellow at King's College London's Policy Institute, where he completed his PhD in War Studies. He works on contemporary defense, security and foreign policy issues. He worked as a lecturer in the Department of Defense Studies at the Royal College of Defense Studies in the period of 2013-2015, and worked as Head of the Security and Counter-Terrorism Department at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the period of 2010-2011. He is an associate fellow at the International Center for the Study of Extremism (ICSR), and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

SCRIPTS OF TERROR THE STORIES TERRORISTS TELL THEMSELVES

Edited by: Benedict Wilkinson
Hardcover: 320 pp.
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Date: 1 February 2020
ASIN: B084RK3DJY







BOOK REVIEW 16



الائتلاف الإسلامي العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب
ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

  @IMCTC_AR | @IMCTC_EN | @IMCTC_FR

www.imctc.org