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## Sandler, Todd. *Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

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The Global Terrorism Index 2019 indicates that the impact of terrorism continues to remain widespread. This is an important indicator because the consistent trend in terrorism heightens the threat of its potential spread to vulnerable areas in the near future. Noted terrorism expert Todd Sandler, in his seminal volume *Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know* draws attention to the ongoing threat of terrorism as a significant geopolitical trend of the twenty-first century.

*Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know* is an influential volume consisting of seven chapters, each of which discusses comprehensive details on the vital issue of terrorism. A noteworthy aspect of the volume is its emphasis and reference to numerous recent terrorist incidents in explaining the trends of terrorism, about which the author has taken painstaking details into account. The chapters are preceded by a preface that includes an account of the personal experience of the author and details his close brush with terrorism, which undoubtedly left an indelible mark on him.

The volume begins with a comprehensive definition of terrorism, which Sandler describes as “the pre-meditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups against noncombatants to obtain a political objective through the intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate victims” (p.1). In this definition, Sandler highlights two key factors – violence and pursuit of a political goal, which, combined, serve to distinguish terrorism from crime. This definition also specifies that both the individuals who perform acts of terror – also known as lone wolf terrorists – and subnational groups or terrorist organizations target victims with certain pre-meditated goals in mind.

Terrorist violence is a costly form of signaling. Subnational groups face severe difficulties in their attempt to impose their will by the direct use of force. As such, they may resort to use of violence and acts of terror as a means of imposing their will. Sometimes such terrorist groups are successful in persuading their targets to do as they wish by convincing their adversaries of the danger of not acquiescing to violent demands.<sup>1</sup> However, given the conflict of interest between terrorists and their targets, ordinary communication or “cheap talk” is insufficient to change minds or influence behavior.<sup>2</sup> Given the high costs associated with combating terrorism, Sandler reasons that it is important to be concerned about the growth of terrorism because of its profound impact particularly upon liberal democracies. Such impacts may include compromising or “circumventing democratic processes” and assuming the financial drain on the economy of implementing counterterrorism measures in order to keep the population safe and the violence.

Terrorism and its consequences are not a new phenomenon, yet new waves of terrorism have been surfacing and have culminated in a new wave of religious fundamentalism in recent times. Irrespective of recent trends, the author questions whether terrorism is successful. He rightly asserts that “success” can be measured by the degree to which terrorists are successful in securing their objectives, whether in combat or strategic terms. In this context, religious fundamentalist terrorist attacks appear to achieve a high degree of “success” for a number of reasons. These attacks seek high casualty levels (through suicide bombers without any forewarning), blurring the line between combatants and noncombatants. This inevitably raises body counts and is crucial in conveying the essential “signals” of the terrorists to the designated targets. Terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS have expressed their interest in engaging in “chemical biological, radiological and nuclear terrorist attack” (p. 34).

An important aspect in the discourse on terrorism includes an examination of the causes of terrorism. It is widely known that anarchy, nationalism, leftist ideology, and religious

fundamentalism are general contributors to terrorism. However, Sandler critically examines the additional role of poverty in the spread of terrorism. According to him, a “low income per capita or poverty causes a greater amount of terrorism” (p. 29). Poverty can be a strong determinant for rising grievances, particularly against ethnic minorities. The political instability in Malaysia in 1969 due to economic disparities between dominant and minority ethnic groups illustrates how poverty was a causal factor for domestic terrorism in the state.

Present day terrorism is significantly marked by the role played by suicide bombers. In February 2019, a suicide bomber rammed his vehicle laden with explosives into a CRPF bus in south Kashmir, where a convoy of 78 vehicles, carrying over 2,500 jawans was moving to Kashmir from Jammu. Suicide bombers play a crucial role in securing terrorists’ objectives. They exert enormous “pressure on democratic governments to concede to terrorists’ demands” (pp. 54-55). Suicide bombers act as precision-guided munitions; hence, they are able to unleash greater casualty toll, which heightens societal anxiety.

Effective counterterrorism measures are the only antidote to heinous acts of terrorism. Such measures include rational policy decisions by the government to deter and reduce the impact of terrorist acts. Sander makes an important distinction between proactive – or offensive – and defensive counterterrorism measures. Proactive counterterrorism measures are offensive because they entail direct confrontation between the government and the terrorists, which restricts terrorists’ resources, finances, safe havens, and infrastructure. This heightens the potential for backlash arising from grievances from the terrorist groups. Alternatively, defensive measures include preventive measures that aim to secure potential victims while raising the stakes for terrorists. Defensive measures are more reactive since these measures are typically instituted after attacks that reveal vulnerabilities. Irrespective of the differences, says Sandler, there is a general tendency to underspend on proactive measures. With countries tending to spend more on defensive counterterrorism measures that benefits their own citizens than on transnational measures to combat terrorism offensively, the success of such efforts becomes limited. In fact, such a strategy is inimical to countering transnational terrorism because it prevents countries from banding together to neutralize transnational terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS, which operate through sleeper cells. Another challenge to countering transnational terrorism is inadequate sharing of information among countries. This challenge severely impeded proactive counterterrorism measures from preventing the 9/11 attacks, for example.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous outcomes of terrorism is the economic consequence. Terrorists will always seek to intensify pressure on the government to accept their demands for independence. Any financial concessions or compromises made by the government to yield to terrorist groups can have far-reaching consequences, including the government’s loss of political credibility in future elections in a democracy.

One of the trends of modern day terrorism is asymmetric warfare, which involves conflict between two unevenly matched adversaries, using various dimensions like information, weapon technology, force size, tactics, etc. A characteristic element of asymmetric warfare is the tendency of terrorists to exploit weaknesses of the government. They also seek to manipulate their adversaries’ ignorance about their strength and strategic objectives. An important aspect of asymmetric warfare is cyberterrorism. Terrorists have not yet used such high-tech tactics to wreak death and destruction. Nor have they launched mass scale biological or chemical attacks. However, it is unlikely that they will continue to use only low-tech methods in implementing their terror designs. As such, Sander’s assertion that terrorist groups are unlikely to launch any large-scale chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) attacks is questionable. Indeed, some such attacks have been carried out already. In 1994, Aum Shinrikyo used sarin gas in public space to assassinate three judges

presiding over legal proceedings against the cult group. In June 1990, the use of chlorine gas by the Liberation of Tamil Eelam against the Sri Lankan military led to the injury of approximately 60 armed personnel.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, ISIS is suspected to have used mustard gas against Kurdish forces in Iraq in August 2015.<sup>4</sup>

In a May 2015 article in the Daesh magazine *Dabiq*, British journalist John Cantlie warns of Daesh's rapid global expansion and its capabilities to launch major terrorist attacks – including the possibility of the group acquiring a nuclear weapon and smuggling it into the United States.<sup>5</sup> The piece, titled “The Perfect Storm,” suggests Daesh ambitions. In 2017, the use of chemical weapons by ISIS in Syria demonstrated that religious fundamentalist terrorist groups have a predilection for use of CBRN weapons. Although one can contend that given the technological challenges involved, the probability for a mass-scale CBRN terrorist attack is remote, to completely overlook this potential threat would be tantamount to complacency, which can lead to catastrophic consequences in the future.

*Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know* is an essential primer, particularly for readers including students, academicians, and journalists who are interested in understanding modern day terrorism. The author has skillfully emphasized that terrorists in the twenty-first century are rational actors seeking political goals through varied tactics in the face of situation-specific conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Reshmi Kazi, “The Correlation Between Non-State Actors and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Connections* 10:4 (Fall 2011), pp. 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31:1 (Summer 2006), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Ackerman, Jeremy Tamsett (eds.), *Jihadists and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (US: CRC Press, 2009), p.85.

<sup>4</sup> “IS suspected of Chemical Arms Attack on Kurds in Iraq,” BBC News, August 14, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33922493>, Accessed on 15 February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> David Albright and Sarah Burkhard, “Daesh Hype about Stealing Nuclear Weapons,” *Institute for Science and International Security*, October 2, 2015 at [https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Daesh\\_Hype\\_about\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons\\_Oct\\_2\\_2015-final1.pdf](https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Daesh_Hype_about_Nuclear_Weapons_Oct_2_2015-final1.pdf), p. 1, Accessed on 15 February 2019.