**Book Review**

# Deterring rational fanatics

Alex S. Wilner
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Terrorism has been a tactic of militants against state governments almost since the birth of government itself. Still, the attacks by al Qaeda against the United States on 11 September 2001 seemed to have presaged the arrival of a new era in global security challenges. In *Deterring Rational Fanatics*, Alex S. Wilner addresses this perceived change by arguing for the application of deterrence theory in counterterrorism efforts, having laid the basis for this argument in his prior works – including as a co-editor of the 2012 book, *Deterring Terrorism: Theory and Practice*. Using deterrence theory to address terrorism is an important development in the field of security studies and international affairs, revitalizing a lagging theoretical perspective and presenting a strong argument for its continued viability. Still more, he presents a before–after comparative research method by which deterrent effects can be measured in the real world. This represents a dramatic improvement over the prior common methods of substantiating theoretical claims in terrorism, which had simply imposed potential explanations onto observed events without subjecting them to rigorous study. While the ultimate findings of the study do little to put questions regarding the deterrent impact of targeted killings to rest, the study design itself sets a standard for future research in both deterrence and counterterrorism tactics more generally.

In *Deterring Rational Fanatics*, Wilner specifically examines the deterrent impact of three major targeted killings in an attempt to test deterrence theory in the contemporary battle to eradicate radical Islamic jihadists. Across six chapters, he delves into deterrence theory broadly, deterring terrorism more specifically, and the use of targeted killings, each an area of critical importance. He addresses critics of deterrence directly, first by revealing the incompleteness of prior conceptualizations of deterrence and then by arguing that deterrence is still useful and germane to current counterterrorism tactics and policies.

In the first three chapters of the book, Wilner explains deterrence, laying out its principles in a readable, yet sophisticated manner that will serve as a useful refresher for those already familiar with the subject and an introduction for those encountering it for the first time. Deterrence rests on the assumption that humans are primarily rational actors that consider costs and benefits before acting. Deterrent strategies play upon this quality by increasing the costs of undesired actions and increasing the benefits of those desired to influence behavior. At base, deterrence is about diminishing an aggressor's motivation to act counter to a defender's interests.

 

After the attacks on 11 September and the renewed focus on the threat of terrorism, security and criminal justice scholars forecasted the end of deterrence. As the introductory chapter describes, many proclaimed that jihadi terrorists, drawing their views from a distorted form of Islamic puritanism, were 'fanatical' and 'irrational', and lacked typical state encumbrances useful in deterring, say, a Cold War-era Soviet Union. Indeed, Wilner agrees that deterrence – as it had come to be discussed – was no longer viable against terrorist organizations, particularly of the extreme Islamist vein. However, he argues that while terrorist organizations are not bound by the same constraints as traditional states, they do have a set of concerns that, if understood and accounted for, could be used to influence their decision making.

In Chapter 2, Wilner argues for the relevance of deterrence in this new context by adding nuance to historical conceptions of it. First, he differentiates deterrence from compellence. Both are forms of coercion, the former proscribing action, the latter prescribing it. Thus, many references to 'deterrence' may, in fact, be discussing *coercive theory*. In any case, where deterrence works, it does so because a *credible* threat is *communicated* that a defined behavior will bring about a costly (to the threatened) response. The costs may come from *punishment*, 'harming something a challenger values' (p. 26), or *denial*, 'reducing the perceived benefits an action is expected to provide' (p. 28).

Wilner applies this nuanced version of deterrence theory to terrorist organizations in Chapter 3. He defines terrorism as 'the use of indiscriminate violence against noncombatants by nonstate actors with the purpose of generating fear in order to "signal", communicate, or advance particular sociopolitical objectives' (Appendix, p. 196). While free from the concerns of states, terrorists share some conventional concerns – managing their public image, successfully attaining operational goals, maintaining camaraderie among their followers, wealth and access to resources, and retaining a claim to religious piety, to name a few. Moreover, these groups have several components – foot soldiers, leadership, supportive communities, state sponsors – each of which might be vulnerable to the deterrent influence. In addition to punishment- and denial-based deterrents, counterterrorist practitioners might utilize delegitimization to attack the credibility of extremist justifications and demonstrate the difficulty of life as a terrorist operative as well as personal hypocrisy in the lifestyles of jihadist leaders.

The following two chapters present the study, which focuses on the use of *targeted killings* by the United States against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Described as 'pursuing and killing individual militants' (p. 76), targeted killings are characterized by lethal force intentionally directed against individuals, extra-judicially, by state governments. The tactic supposedly harms terrorist organizations by forcing their leaders into hiding, reducing recruitment, heightening intra-organizational paranoia, impeding operations, eliminating experts, diminishing professionalism and destroying morale. More to the point, however, targeted killings communicate the United States' capability and resolve to inflict costs, which should produce notable changes in terrorist activity in accord with US wishes, such as decreasing the levels of violence and avoiding civilian casualties. Wilner tests this hypothesis by comparing terrorist attacks in the six weeks prior and subsequent to three important targeted killings, measuring overall levels of violence (sheer number of attacks on civilians, Afghan and coalition forces), the sophistication of these attacks, as well as their type and nature. What he finds arguably contradicts his hypothesis: Overall violence tends to *increase* after targeted killings, though it shifts toward less sophisticated (less 'professional')

attacks of a less preferred type (for example, those harming Afghan civilians over Western and Afghani government forces).

Wilner's explanations for why these findings make a positive case for the deterrent effect of targeted killings are not entirely clear. For instance, while representing a change from militants' target preferences, it is not readily apparent why a shift from terrorist attacks on US military 'hard' targets to Afghan civilian 'soft' targets would necessarily be the preferred outcome of the United States. Nevertheless, the study does demonstrate how deterrent methods, including targeted killings, might be tested for efficacy. Furthermore, even if one believes the study fails to show the deterrent effect of targeted killings, the strength of Wilner's theoretical innovations provides a valuable basis for exploring the continued usefulness of a variety of deterrent strategies. The final chapter summarizes the work, making this very point.

According to Wilner, deterrence theory has developed in three stages. The first laid the groundwork of the theory after World War II, but failed to develop it in full. The second stage arose in the milieu of the Cold War, where it provided the rationale for mutually assured destruction as a deterrent to nuclear weapons deployment. A third wave occurred in the 1970s, adding finer detail to the theory. *Deterring Rational Fanatics* pushes forward into a fourth stage. Going beyond the narrow view of state-to-state conflict, Wilner proposes a new set of deterrence principles adequate for use in a world where the dominant threat is stateless, amorphous, decentralized, religiously motivated and fanatically ideological. His expansion of the theory should be a welcome addition to present inquiries into the nature of terrorism and viable responses to it.

Moreover, Wilner's description of deterrence as 'manipulating another's behavior in a way that suits your needs, interests, or goals' (p. 16) is a near perfect articulation of current criminological views on the operation of *controls* on the behavior of individuals *vis-à-vis* the 'needs, interests, or goals' of a society. Controls direct, redirect or guide individuals toward a given end, making societally undesirable actions costly and conventional action beneficial. While hesitation is warranted in importing theoretical constructs tailored to explain international phenomena to individual and small subnational behavior, Wilner's expansions of the theory of deterrence in international affairs need not be confined there. Control theorists in sociology and criminology may gain insights into nuances in deterrence that can be adapted to explain individual and organizational behavior outside the scope of terrorism and international affairs.

Wilner uses a *systematic* approach to guide counterterrorism policy. From both an international and domestic view, a systematic control perspective sees deterrents as part of an overarching network of interrelations between individual actors and organizations composing a system designed toward meeting some common end. While commonality of interests seems antithetical to the idea of terrorism, Wilner argues that deterrence 'depends on the existence of a preferred and mutually shared state of affairs between adversaries' where 'behavioral preferences must overlap … even if only minimally …' (p. 23). A common desire to avoid their own ideological and group annihilation means that levers of influence must exist to influence the action choices of terrorist groups, even if they are not always intuitive.

*Deterring Rational Fanatics* is suitable for both counterterrorism practitioners and scholars. While expansive in its academic scope, it is not so erudite as to escape either the more casual reader or the less abstract needs of a practical operator. What is more, its

contributions to deterrence theory are useful for fields as wide-ranging as foreign policy, domestic security and criminology. Students of terrorism and deterrence theory more broadly should have this work in their collection.

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