

Review – Scripts of Terror

Written by Louise Pears

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LOUISE PEARS, APR 23 2023

Scripts of Terror
By Benedict Wilkinson
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The central puzzle at the heart of this book is “why terrorists chose terrorism at all” (p.3). In the answer that follows the book makes two contributions to terrorism studies. The first is the introduction of the idea of ‘scripts’ as an explanation for terrorists’ strategic choices. The second is the very detailed empirical accounts offered of Islamist terrorist activity in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Terrorism studies has long been preoccupied with the seeming irrationality of terrorism as a tactic (see Caplan 2006; Nalbandov 2013). This sits alongside a literature that approaches terrorism as a tactic and strategy (as opposed to looking at psychological or ideological explanations) (see Neumann and Smith 2007). There have been some attempts from within the discipline to fit the choice into a frame of rationality. For example, in Crenshaw’s influential piece she considers how an idea of collective rationality might explain the seemingly irrational decisions of terrorists. Or for example Pape details how suicide terrorism can be seen as a rational strategic choice because “the terrorist political cause made more gains after the resort to suicide operations than it had before” (Pape 2003, 343). Wilkinson instead turns to behavioural economics and behavioural science and specifically the ideas of narratives -or scripts- to answer this question. The book argues that terrorism is a rational and strategic decision, but that only makes sense once you recognize that scripts play a role in decision making. Where scripts are particular cognitive short cuts, stories that are about the “likely sequence of events and likely outcome of that sequence” (p.7). Therefore terrorists, like all decision makers, rely on scripts to help make their decisions. It identifies eight scripts through the analysis of the case studies. These are: survival, power play, mobilization, provocation and polarisation, delegitimation, attrition, co-operation and mobilization.

In the case studies Wilkinson explores how particular strategic decisions can be explained by reference to the specific script that the terrorists were using in the strategic choice. In chapter two’s analysis of Egypt, Wilkinson details how various scripts were employed in different phases of Egyptian Islamist groups campaigns from the late 1940s and the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood through to the early 2000s and EIG (Egyptian Islamic Group) and EIJ (Egyptian Islamic Jihad). Here Wilkinson details how different scripts are followed at different times as a way to understand and explain both particular strategic choices, but also to understand their failure. He then uses this to suggest that the Egyptian terrorist organisations scripts were flawed for three reasons: first, they overestimated what was in their means to achieve; second, they oversimplified the relationship between cause and effect, for example missing how repression and reprisals will complicate the expected pattern; third, they applied scripts taken from other contexts that did not reflect their own situation.

In a similar fashion the analysis is applied to two further case studies: the emergence of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia between 1998 and 2007 in chapter three and the development of Ansar al-Sharia and ISIS in Yemen in chapter four. In all these cases the author suggests that a fealty to scripts can explain strategic choices because they presume particular patterns of reaction and behaviour that do not then materialize. Or, put more simply, there is a considerable gap between what these organisations think will occur and what then actually occurs.

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These case studies, put together through interviews in each location with a range of diplomatic and security figures, as well as disengaged members of Islamist groups and publications from the various terrorist organisations under consideration, are of great merit in and of themselves given the meticulously researched timelines and accounts of terrorist activity they provide. Therefore, whilst the book is squarely placed within terrorism studies there is also value added to Middle Eastern studies as well as scholars more widely who want an insight into the histories of Islamist groups in these locations.

This work could be strengthened through a greater account of where these scripts come from. Are they internal stories terrorist tell themselves, or do they draw from the activities and events of terrorist out there – are they self-authored, or do they tie into wider myths and ideas of violence in those countries or internationally? At times it can be difficult to distinguish between the script and the strategy or to fully understand the relationship between the two. For example, does a script suggest a particular strategic choice, or does a certain strategy then leave the actor searching for a script through which to pursue said strategy? Many of the interesting observations around the failure of strategic choices and the descriptions around the change in approaches or times where there is resistance and contestation from within the group go outside of the script framework. There is then potential to develop the script approach more fully in future work.

The language and attention to narrative also brings this work into conversation with scholarship from the ‘narrative turn’ in International Relations. In terrorism studies it is often scholarship from within critical terrorism studies that has paid attention to the role of stories and narrative in terror and counterterrorism (e.g., Hodges 2011; Jackson 2018). This work is based in narrative approaches that emphasize how ‘[w]e glean ideas about the world and our place in it from the stories we are told; we repeat these ideas and ideals in the stories that we tell’ (Shepherd 2013, 345). Related work also pays attention to counter-terrorism narratives, and the role of narrative in radicalisation (e.g., Braddock and Horgan 2016). This book can bring some of this more critical work into conversation with more traditional terrorism studies and hopefully open up a potential avenue of dialogue between the two approaches to terrorism studies. However, an ontology based in rational choice means that this book did not consider ideas of ideology, emotion and identity. I argue that the explanatory power of narrative could be more fully realized if these elements were incorporated. Then the question is less about reconciling the strategic choice with rationality, but a more fulsome consideration of the conditions of those strategic choices. However, what this work has so effectively shown is that stories matter, they matter to terrorists and so they should matter too to those invested in better understanding terrorism.

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