Counterterrorism and Its Consequences

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Does Counter-Terrorism Work? By Richard English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 272p.

The Practice and Problems of Transnational Counter-Terrorism. By Fiona de Londras. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 275p.

Counterterrorism in Transition: Post-2011 Tunisian Democracy and the War on Terror. By Guendalina Simoncini. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 203p.

Counterterrorism is both a reaction to and an anticipation of the activities of those who wield terror for political purposes. Counterterrorism pits itself against terrorism, aimed at ending or at least limiting its operations, spread, and damage. As Richard English has acknowledged, non-state terrorism has much less impact on the world than the counterterrorism it elicits. The vast powers at the disposal of states and their reactive tendency to military methods, such as after 9/11, make this entirely predictable. Fiona de Londras' examination of transnational counterterrorism ably documents how states acting in concert have reshaped the world, particularly in the post 9/11 era. Guendalina Simoncini's book on Tunisia clearly illustrates how counterterrorism can be used to enable the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Tunisia and the resultant disastrous consequences for that society.

Counterterrorism, in the main, has also come to mean a raft of restrictions on freedom, military interventions, wars, judicial and extrajudicial processes, the use of private military companies, internment, and political polarization, both national and international. In their own ways, each of these books argues for reconsidering counterterrorism's expansive purview: Richard English's dispassionate accounting, Fiona de Londras' insistence on human rights and accountability, and Guendalina Simoncini's cautionary tale of how counterterrorism has been appropriated by authoritarian actors to serve an undemocratic power-grab.

Underlying their various deliberations lies the question that English addresses directly: Does counterterrorism work? To paraphrase Robert Cox on theory: counterterrorism is always for someone and some purpose (Robert Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10(2), 1981). Is that "someone" always the state, and is the purpose always ending rebellion by non-state entities, quelling uprising, and reinserting state power? To varying degrees, these three books from different standpoints all insist that this should not be the case, but often is. Richard English's call to the powerful to consider how they "self-harm" by their chosen counterterrorism strategy is driven by his historicist's observation of how injustice and suppression are ineffective in the longue durée. His critique is best aimed, not at the practitioners of counterterrorism, but at their political masters. Fiona de Londras's forensic examination of transnational counterterrorism is propelled by her lawyerly insistence on legal justice and human rights. Guendalina Simoncini deftly illustrates the malign effect of counterterrorism on democracy in Tunisia.

In his previous book, *Does Terrorism Work?* (2019), English concluded that we do not pay enough attention to the circumstances in which terrorism does works. In this latest book, he addresses the effectiveness of counterterrorism again using a case study methodology and returning to the same three cases: the post 9/11 War on Terror and Al Qaeda, Northern Ireland and the IRA, and Israeli counterterrorism and Hamas.

In his introduction, English points to the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and counterterrorism and the problems of defining success in counterterrorism. He proposes an objective assessment, avoiding the overly critical and distancing himself from the argument that counter-terrorism operations will inevitably promote terrorism. To achieve this, he advocates for a long-term, historical-mindedness and sets out a "systematic, layered framework" within which success—defined in terms of ending terrorism—will be gauged. He revisits the four "layers of potential success" which have their counterparts in what he previously identified as the successes of terrorism in his 2019 book, *Does Terrorism Work?* where he

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argues for an honest acknowledgement of the ways in which terrorism does, in fact, work.

In this more recent work, he proposes gauging the success of counterterrorism in denying strategic victory, partial strategic victory, tactical success, and the inherent rewards of struggle, such as status and financial gain to non-state groups. *Does Counterterrorism Work?* systematically applies this framework to his three case studies. In part 1, he examines Afghanistan, Iraq, and ISIS and assesses the strategic success of allied forces in the War on Terror, concluding that although outright victory was elusive, credible claims of various kinds of partial strategic victory could be made. The results were mixed, he adds, with success at the operational level, but he reminds the reader of the high human costs. In concluding, English considers the rise of domestic far-right terrorism in the United States as the final twist to this story, without making it entirely clear how this phenomenon connects with the War on Terror.

In his analysis of Northern Ireland, English focuses on the effectiveness of British counterterrorism directed at the Provisional IRA to the exclusion of other organizations, including proscribed loyalist organizations. He considers an array of state moves to counter their operations, including internment and infiltration, and concludes that the state's gradual realization that containment, rather than eradication, was the more realistic strategy, alongside addressing the political roots of rebellion. His work points to the effectiveness of high-grade intelligence, cooperation between various state operators, and the importance of adherence by the state to the rule of law. The level of violence has drastically diminished, yet Northern Ireland continues to have the highest risk of terrorism of any region in the UK. Between 2015 and 2021, Monaghan, Slocombe, and McIlhatton ("Examining the relevance of 'EVIL DONE' to the current terrorist threat landscape in the United Kingdom," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 2025) found that 88% of all terrorist incidents in the UK related to Northern Ireland. While some in the IRA migrated to Sinn Féin, whose political star has risen, small numbers migrated into dissident organizations who have continued military campaigns, albeit with greatly reduced capacity and numbers.

The incessant dividing and, in some cases, multiplying of non-state armed groups (e.g., "Internal Politics and the Fragmentation of Armed Groups," Perkoski, Evan. *International Studies Quarterly*, 2019-12, Vol. 63 (4), pp. 876–889; and "Go arm me: How militant fragmentation affects external support." Berlin, Mark, and Malone, Iris. *International Interactions*, 2023-07, Vol. 49 (4), pp. 557–586) indicate that counterterrorism strategies often must simultaneously address the operations and capacities of multiple organizations within one theatre, while managing the whack-a-mole nature of neutralizing one threat only to have a new (or re-purposed) one replace it. This is the case in Northern Ireland and elsewhere and counterterrorism must evolve to address these developments, requiring fresh analyses in the future.

In Part 3 of his book, Richard English turns to Israeli counter-terrorism, beginning with a survey from the Six Day War to Operation Protective Edge in 2014, with the narrative stopping long before the latest tragedy currently unfolding in Gaza. Would its inclusion have shifted the needle of the analysis? English concludes that unless there is Israeli strategic engagement with Palestinian grievances and desire for statehood, there will be no resolution to this conflict. In light of more recent events following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack, this prospect seems more distant than ever.

English refers to the "final twist to the story" in his analysis of the War on Terror. Is there ever a final twist, since history does not stop being made? The long-term historically minded might refer to Pieter Geyl, the Dutch historian who saw history as "an argument without end." How might future Irish texts analyze the Northern Ireland case, we wonder? If in that future, countries swapped historically minded analyses of this same period, will there be commonality in the various conclusions they reach from the same set of facts?

Ultimately, English's critique is a carefully measured treatise on counterterrorism based on the conviction that the use of overwhelming force in asymmetrical contests is not, in the long run, smart or effective. English issues serious warnings about the "self-harm" that states can inflict on themselves by engaging in interventions that are regarded as immoral. Does such "self-harm" result from humanitarian alarm at harms inflicted in the name of counterterrorism? There is ample evidence in all three of the cases he examined of states using such methods. English insists that success in counterterrorism relies on "just counterterrorism… legally bound, accountable and proportionate."

Accountability, however, is hard to come by, and what there is, according to Fiona de Londras, is insufficient deterrence for states operating outside of the law. Her book provides an ambitious and incisive critique of the law and practice of transnational counter-terrorism. It is an impressively grounded, well-sourced, and readable examination in which she identifies the problems of "the counterterrorism juggernaut," which she describes as the immense institution of trans-national counterterrorism and points to deficits in formality, accountability, and transparency. She asserts that while human rights are frequently used to justify counterterrorism measures, they are rarely considered within the breadth or reach of such measures. She attributes this to international institutional linkages, "normative sprawl," and what she sees as the rapacious project of preventing and countering violent extremism, which has seeped into multiple aspects of individual and national daily life.

The book is organized into five main chapters, where each chapter deals with an aspect of transnational counterterrorism in a tour de force. Chapter 1 sets out the

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institutions, including the UN Security Council, its subordinate entities and committees, the General Assembly, the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact. It also describes the "cast of thousands" composed of regional organizations, terrorism-specific informal institutions, informal institutions engaged in terrorism-related activity, and private actors. Finally, she explains the institutional linkages between these entities. Chapter 2 explains the law and the dynamics of law-making, touching on the administrative, criminal, and surveillance, and concluding with an examination of rights. Chapter 3 examines the expansionism of transnational counterterrorism, surveying the issue of borders, the Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (C/PVE), the internet, and counterterrorism as human rights. Chapter 4 considers transnational counterterrorism in the domestic sphere, as a national issue, its capacity to undermine constitutionality, the issue of individual human rights, and the issue of repatriation. The final fifth chapter, the most compelling in the book, examines the issue of accountability or lack thereof.

As in Guendalina Simoncini's analysis of counterterrorism in Tunisia, de Londras argues that under these conditions, states, without accountability, can implement repression which they justify in terms of countering terrorism, while shaping the norms that render these processes unproblematic. She argues for the urgency of finding ways to contain or address these trends and outlines the role of states, especially the permanent members of the UN Security Council, in constructing a transnational counterterrorism that has eroded national control and reframed counterterrorism as an issue of international peace and security.

Yet, she reminds, there is no clarity about what constitutes terrorism, and this lack of definition assists the diversity of state responses to terrorism, which have escaped close scholarly scrutiny until now. The lack of definition, she concludes, means that the category "terrorism" is entirely expandable. Transnational counterterrorism law and practice have also permeated into a wide range of diverse fields, from the protection of children and refugees to the acquisition of weapons to the protection of cultural heritage. She attempts to cover these fields under five themes: the institutions of international counterterrorism in Chapter 1; international counterterrorism law in Chapter 2; expansiveness of international counterterrorism in Chapter 3; domestic effects in Chapter 4; and accountability in international counterterrorism in Chapter 5.

De Londras argues that the role of private actors, the institutional sprawl of the rhetoric and measures, and their penetration into diverse aspects of daily life, and the absence of regulation are particularly worrisome since international counterterrorism has the "gravitational pull" of a security issue. Thus, a process of ever greater restriction on rights and temporary measures becomes permanent, compounding the effects of securitization, where human rights are redefined as duties to protect. Counterterrorism never goes away, she argues.

Her epilogue catalogues the outstanding concerns following the General Assembly's Zero Draft of the seventh review of their Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), which does little in the author's view to address these concerns. The capacity for expansion of definitions allows for the future inclusion of issues such as misogyny, violent nationalism, xenophobic, and anti-authority expressions. International disagreements about repatriation of foreign fighters are addressed in a compromise Resolution 75/291, which does not oblige states to repatriate or to accept the repatriated. The lack of embedding of human rights standards into the GCTS and the removal of the proposal for the appointment of a Human Rights Ombudsperson are concerns, while Resolution 75/291 calls for a review of how the rule of law, human rights, and gender might be integrated into the GCTS.

De Londras highlights the resistance of powerful states to integrate human rights standards into transnational counterterrorism, transparency, monitoring, and evaluation. She sees little prospect of effective repair of the system, since "the vast transnational counter-terrorism assemblage… suffers from a severe flaw that is too often unarticulated: it does not work. Or at least it does not work if the aspiration is to counter, prevent, and eradicate terrorism" (p. 187). It leaves the reader wondering why, then, has transnational counterterrorism flourished as it has. Is it purely down to the imperialist and hegemonic tendencies on the part of the world powers, or is there a more nuanced way of understanding the intent underpinning the proliferation?

For de Londras, since the root causes of terrorism are a lack of openness, accountability, material wellbeing, and capacity for democratic participation, including through peaceful assembly, expression, and protest—all of which are negatively impacted by counterterrorism measures—the risk is that the GCTS aggravates rather than contains or ends terrorism.

De Londras provides a panoramic, incisive, and rigorous analysis of transnational counterterrorism in its current iteration. She points to what she considers to be the flaws: the expansionism, the incursions into human rights, and the lack of accountability. Her concerns and criticisms are clear. What is less clear is what she sees as the motivation behind the drive for expansionism, the erosion of human rights, and how she supposes her concerns can be addressed while still containing, mitigating, and minimizing the risk of terrorism, which, she concedes, causes harm. Repair of the system is not sufficient or feasible, she implies. So, what is to be done? How do we manage the Anders Breiviks and the Real IRAs while we do it?

For de Londras, transnational counterterrorism is "a mode of domination and an instrument of violence"

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(p. 11). She wonders if treating terrorism as a crime may be a preferable alternative, but there is little to no development of this idea, one in which there is much merit, and offers the potential to overwhelm the exceptionalizm with which terrorism is treated.

Although the book is a sweeping introduction, it is not comprehensive in that it omits, for example, United Nations terrorism treaties—but it is impossible to include everything. It impressively sets the stage for debate about the benefits and drawbacks of an ever-expanding transnational counter-terrorism order and the reversibility of its worst applications and potentials.

In *Counterterrorism in Transition*, Guendalina Simoncini brings to bear a "holistic, epistemological and gender conscious approach" to counterterrorism in Tunisia, where multi-party democracy was established in 2011 following the Revolution of Dignity, which lasted until 2019 when the president suspended parliament and has ruled by decree since then. Guendalina Simoncini argues that counterterrorism has been used in the Tunisian context to restrict freedom and political expression, and has facilitated the installation of an authoritarian government, quashing the achievement of the revolution and ushering in an economic and social crisis.

Methodologically, the book adopts a critical approach to examine both the discursive and empirical aspects of counter-jihadi policies and practices in Tunisia from 2011 until 2019, the period leading up to the reinsertion of authoritarian government in 2021. Guendalina Simoncini does this through an analysis of strategies, policies, and counter-jihadi measures and through critical discourse analysis of presidential speeches, parliamentary debates, and interviews with local and international stakeholders.

The book's second chapter positions the work within democratization studies and critical terrorism studies, arguing against a simple success-failure binary in the analysis of revolutionary political change, citing the examples of post-Franco Spain and post-2011 Egypt. Rather, Guendalina Simoncini favors an interrogation of discourse to reveal the connections between language, power, and ideology in Tunisia.

The third chapter provides a broad account of counterterrorism measures in pre- and post-revolutionary Tunisia. She identifies three phases: the emergency response immediately following the 2011 revolution; the institutionalization of counterterrorism measures from 2015 to 2017; and the prevention-oriented approach from 2017 onwards. Here, she emphasizes the intricacies of Tunisian counterterrorism and the plethora of national and international actors involved in the legal, judicial, and evolving aspects of counterterrorism.

In Chapter 4, she examines post 2011 discourse in Tunisia, which she argues dehumanized the terrorist, legitimized abuses of human rights, and established a bifurcated security versus freedom discourse which ushered in the militarization and enshrined male security actors, while posing the notion of "moderate Tunisian Islam" as the antidote to terrorism.

Chapter 5 explains how counterterrorism displaced democratic norms and values, facilitating the suppression of dissent and the erosion of democracy. In the final chapter, Guendalina Simoncini positions her arguments in the broader field of counterterrorism studies and democratiation, drawing lessons from the Tunisian case and the manner in which counterterrorism can undermine the transition to democracy elsewhere. Her work also takes pains to dismantle Orientalist presumptions that democracy is antithetical to Arab Muslim culture.

The book documents how President Kais Saied has used counterterrorism to pursue the political opposition, taking Tunisia backwards in terms of democratization. The US contributed around $30 m into the "professionalization" of Tunisian counterterrorism, military education, and law enforcement following attacks in 2015 and 2016. The deployment of counterterrorism by the president in a project of political suppression has put past administrations in Washington in an uncomfortable position, where a regional partner is seen to be undermining civil liberties and freedom. The measures documented in the book may discomfort the current US administration less, yet the lessons for political transitions elsewhere are no less apparent.

The rendering of political problems into security issues clears the path for the political weaponization of counterterrorism discourses and practices and the reinforcement of government power to neutralize opposition by characterizing it as terrorism. In such dispensations, there are legitimate views and illegitimate views, and counterterrorism and the legal might of the state can be deployed to silence the latter.

Guendalina Simoncini does an excellent job of drawing the lessons from the Tunisian case and pointing to their relevance to Jihadist movements elsewhere. While she acknowledges the indispensability of some measures to counter terrorism, her work underlines the risks of overextension and misapplication and their weaponization when in the hands of those with despotic tendencies. If I have a criticism, it is of the gender analysis, which seems limited to intermittent commentary on the position of, or impact on, women. Masculinity rarely features. To address gender with the same precision and attention to nuance that she brings to the rest of her work could be the subject of her next book.

In reading these three books, I mused on how far we have come in terrorism studies, from the days—it does not seem long ago to one of my vintage—when to criticize counterterrorism was to be seen as a terrorist sympathizer. These three books sit alongside others like Leonie Jackson's *What Is Counterterrorism for?* (Bristol University Press, 2024), Conor Gearty's *Homeland Insecurity: The Rise and Rise of Global Anti-Terrorism Law* (Polity Press, 2024). The

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growth in a critical literature that offers a well-informed and measured commentary is a mark of the maturity of critical thinking about terrorism.

Counterterrorism is also shaped by a set of economic relationships between governments that provide military aid, sign defense contracts with the arms industry, and outsource military and security to the private security industry. It operates in a domestic and export market in weapons, generating profits for the security industries and weapons manufacturers, often financed out of the public purse. The degree to which the arms industry has access to the highest levels of government, the quantum of their political donations, the extent to which there is a revolving door between political office and their board rooms suggests ever-closer relationships between those who manufacture and sell weapons and those with their hands on the wheels of power in the UK, the US, and elsewhere. This must give rise to concerns about the effect of this relationship on policies, including those on terrorism and counterterrorism, and the extent to which they impact on public interest, support militaristic impulses, or take account of human rights obligations.

Former CIA officer Ray McGovern extended the concept of the military-industrial complex to the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Intelligence-Media-Academia-Think-Tank-Complex—MICIMATT, the comprehensive network of interests that drive and sustain militaristic and interventionist policies through, inter alia, political lobbying, media manipulation, and academic endorsements (Youvan (2024). Ray McGovern's MICIMATT: The Military-Industrial-Congressional-Intelligence-Media-Academia-Think-Tank). Further scholarship on counterterrorism might do well to use this lens with which to examine this burgeoning field of operations.

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