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## Aspects of Counterterrorism: New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter-Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs; Hacking ISIS: How to Destroy the Cyber Jihad; Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally

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# Review Essay

## ***Aspects of Counterterrorism***

### ***New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter-Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs***

Hamed El-Said. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 302pp.

### ***Hacking ISIS: How to Destroy the Cyber Jihad***

Malcom Nance and Chris Sampson. New York: Skyhorse, 2017. 320pp.

### ***Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally***

Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. 344pp.

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Terrorism and the term 'jihadism' have become a global phenomenon, a product of modernity and globalization which shows no sign of abating. The number of radicalized young people in Western and non-Western countries who are willing to travel overseas in

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the cause of jihad and violent extremism has increased significantly since 9/11. In the 20 years since the largely driven U.S. counter-terrorism efforts began in response, jihadism in force and numbers has risen at least by fourfold in terms of the numbers of Sunni jihadist fighters in the field from the Middle East to North Africa, Afghanistan and beyond according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2018 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>). However we look at it as social scientists, policy makers or interested observers, it represents a failure to some extent of state and society to deal with the global threat of violent extremism at any level, involving any religion, ethnicity or ideological forms which seek to change the political and social order.

Many Western and non-Western countries rushed to acquire counter-terrorism measures considering these threats, many of which have come under attack from human rights organizations and civil society. Paul Hoffman has argued that in dealing with terrorism:

The international community needs new tools and strategies, perhaps a new normative structure, to deal with these dire threats to the world's security. In the absence of international agreement about the new tools, strategies, and norms, the "war on terrorism" is being waged on its own imperatives regardless of existing norms. (Hoffman 2004: 933)

Thousands of would be jihadis have left Western Europe and North America (and elsewhere) to take part in extremist activities in the Middle East. The rise of jihadism is a disconcerting one as many alienated and disenchanting young people, not all of whom have a great deal of ideological motivation, appear willing to join the ranks. Global counter-radicalization practices have been created to mitigate the spread of radicalization, but these vary from extreme state-sponsored programs to community-based approaches. While countries like Denmark appear to be relatively successful in countering radicalization, the United Kingdom and France continue to suffer from limited success in their implemented policies, with radicalization and attacks increasing in frequency.

This review essay deals with the rise of these groups on a global basis focusing on counterterrorism and de-radicalization as a tool of the state/Governments in modifying/changing political behavior. The texts here specifically focus on how these governments use counter-terrorism measures to address extremism/ radicalization of individuals, but of course they also assess how these movements came about to begin with.

All these works focus on the theory and practice concerning certain questions which are currently inadequately addressed.

All these books cover similar aspects. They talk about the lives of real people caught up in conflicts which are complex and often violent (like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa among others). And they provide real insights into this life. These among others are the breeding grounds for terrorism. Poverty, alienation, and social dislocation among others at the individual level, the failure of the state to provide economic and social security again among others nurture the roots of this terrorism, often with devastating consequences and actions. This phenomenon is ongoing, difficult, and complex in nature and often has horrific consequences for people around the world who become innocent victims of terrorism. They all involve the relatively recent rise of the Islamic state, how it operates and why.

**HAMED EL-SAID NEW APPROACHES TO COUNTERING TERRORISM:  
DESIGNING AND EVALUATING RADICALIZATION AND DE-  
RADICALIZATION PROGRAMMES**

Hamed El-Said's work is part of the prestigious New Security Challenges series, under the editorship of Stuart Croft at the University of Warwick in the UK. As the variety of threats emerged in the post-Cold War period so did the revising of security agendas to deal with these. Often, we are seeing the "softer" side of security emerging such as developing from human security and environmental security perspectives, among others. Counterterrorism is typically seen as a hard security issue but the context in which it plays out has many elements. In this case de-radicalization (hereafter de-rad) of violent extremists.

In this thorough and insightful text, Professor Hamed El-Said looks at the emergence of way might be called "softer" approaches which aim to prevent, mitigate, and generally counter violent extremists. The goal is to develop a framework which provides policy makers and experts the context and conditions but also the tools required to address this. This is one of the most thorough and professionally researched of the academic texts on countering terrorism that focuses on de-radicalization techniques and for this it is to be lauded. It contains a wealth of information using primary research looking at all the stakeholders involved in the phenomenon and the context and conditions under which the de-rad programs across cultures might be successful or not. So, the author looks at de-rad policies and practice across cultures (Australia being the Western non-Muslim majority

example, along with Singapore as the Asian non-Muslim majority state) and followed by others such as Mauritania, Sudan and Turkey (all Muslim majority states). It's a pretty large task and one that El-Said manages efficiently and with great skill. He is well placed to do this having worked extensively in academic circles but also working for the United Nations on these issues. Such highly skilled scholars who cross the academic/practitioner divide are highly sought after and Hamed El-Said manages to deal with the practical and theoretical aspects in an incredibly efficient fashion.

In general, there is an important rationale for this. Such de-rad programs have been under-researched, not completely understood if researched and information and data on them of course is typically limited. This is the nature of the subject and to be understood in terms of how the security information is overly sensitive.

Part of the problem lies in definition according to the author. There is still disagreement and lack of consensus on what makes up a counter terrorism de-rad program and what makes such a program different from other policies. There is also an assumption built in that many of these programs are associated with de-radicalizing Muslims and thus perpetuating stereotypes that Muslims constitute the vast identification of terrorists/extremists. As much of this occurs in prisons, there is little effort to analyze prison policies also. Several findings emerge from the work.

- 1) Looking at a mix of countries and how they use de-radicalization policies is probably a good idea (heterogeneity in the mix rather than homogeneity).
- 2) We must be careful what we define as de-rad program.
- 3) The role of religion in causing radicalization has been simplistically understood and exaggerated in importance.
- 4) There is no one "size fits all policy" that can work as we have to take account of different, legal, and cultural practice.
- 5) Civil society is paramount in changing hearts and minds as is also improving economic and social conditions.
- 6) Human rights conditions can be improved under certain circumstances in the countries embarking on de-rad.

The conventional wisdom is that terrorists are basically un-understandable in many ways. Who could commit such atrocities? El-Said reminds us that "Nobody is born a terrorist. Terrorism is a process, not an event" (264). In this light I completely agree with the author; in countering terrorism we must never forget the human element and the

environment and context in which people align themselves with terrorist activity. We need greater understanding and El-Said provides this understanding through his expert research.

### **HACKING ISIS**

Malcolm Nance and Chris Sampson have developed an invaluable resource in this text and a timely one as Hacking and cyber warfare has expanded exponentially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Cyber-warfare is of course highly prominent in the media these days with accusations of Russia and China seeking to influence the U.S. Presidential elections in the present and the past and we have developed images of hackers and technological warriors creating attacks against government computer systems and seeking to undermine national security and the nation-state. These do of course pose problems for the state and signify the rise of non-state actors (and of course state actors) in trying to influence and change outcomes as well as simply wreak havoc. Cyber-terrorism has been using such tools to close the critical operations of government but also it is used to influence through propaganda and media the way people think and behave. It is one of the biggest threats that exists right now in terms of its influence and potential damage it can do.

Nance and Sampson crucially recognize this and are intimately involved in the world of counterterrorism in the journalistic and intelligence professions and well placed to assess these threats and challenges. They have been in the front lines of this cyber warfare and addressed how to prevent the spread of this ideology further. The development of how ISIS recruits young people, disseminates its propaganda, and works as a cult like organization are all explored in the book. However, where it really succeeds is in illustrating the depth and content of its struggle and success in the covert-warfare operations where the battles for hearts and minds is being waged on a global level. The authors refer to the Cyber caliphate throughout the text and show how in some ways though ISIS appears to be receding as a physical threat, it is assuming another form (as a Ghost caliphate ) using the weapons of technology and the internet to not only keep itself alive but also to recruit and radicalize new members.

This was a difficult task given the enormous amount of material on the internet and in written form. However, the evolution of cyber warfare aims at promoting the ISIS brand is covered in minute detail. The text explores important cyber jihadists such as Anwar al-Awlaki, (sometimes known as the “The Bin Laden of the Internet,” Abu Sayyaf,

the former head of the Islamic State, and Junaid Hussein. This triumvirate of cyber warfare specialists have wreaked havoc in ensuring ISIS and its message has gone global. The book expertly describes the make-up and organization of the digital warfare campaigns with its different outlets in each province (wilaya) containing an official media channel. For instance, the al- Hayat Media Center is the media outlet created to communicate with non-Arabic speaking listeners/viewers. One of its specialties is propaganda films. Furqan Media is the official leadership media branch, used by Islamic State's official spokesmen and the group's leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi himself.

The different channels and media outlets managed to share their content for years by exploiting various software programs and online sites, both on the surface and deep in the dark web, showing the extreme liquidity and adaptability of cyber jihad. Following the description and analysis of cyber warfare waged by ISIS, the book offers a perspective on how the messages of the Caliphate emerge and have evolved looking at the timeline from Al Qaeda through the Islamic state.

The book even goes further and looks at counterterrorism efforts by groups and individuals on the other side (groups like Anonymous, for instance) and the major efforts to track jihadi activity online which has sparked a small cottage industry.

### **INSIDE AL-SHABAB**

Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph locate their research in a different locale and context (The Horn of Africa) when examining the insidious emergence of the highly secretive jihadist group Al-Shabab and its links with Al-Qaeda whom they call Al-Qaeda's most powerful ally. Al-Shabab (which is Arabic for "the Youth") emerged in 2000 but was not fully an independent organization until 2006, when it broke away from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) for which it had been operating as its military wing. In January 2019, it staged a 19-hour siege of the DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi, Kenya resulting in at least 21 dead and many more casualties. Based in Somalia and with the explicit aim of overthrowing the Government there, this is an organization that existed at different levels of governance over huge parts of central and southern Somalia, challenging the Somali state in what at the time, in the early 2000's, was broadly perceived as a prime example of a "failed" state. Recruiting hundreds of jihadi fighters on a global basis, the group affiliated themselves with Al-Qaeda, engaged in tax collection, received revenue from "protection" money, had Sharia law imposed in areas it controlled and maintained this order through its Hisbah

religious police force. In short, it simply replicated the models of many jihadi groups like ISIS, even though it was regarded as a “pioneer in jihadist-insurgent governance,” according to Christopher Anazalone in the foreword to the text (vii).

Maruf and Josef who are first rate journalists are to be congratulated on this work, which is tricky and somewhat dangerous work. Included in the research are interviews with important politicians in Somalia as well as government officials, past insurgents, and current ones and even people who were involved in earlier incarnations of the group such Al-Ijtihad. Importantly, they cover all the ranks of the group but also look at U.S. diplomatic cables, emails from the U.S. State Department and the organizations own propaganda machine in providing a balance assessment of their way of doing things.

And they have proved to be a deadly organization killing hundreds of civilians and troops in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and elsewhere. October 14, 2017, for instance, was the moment which many Somalis see as their 9/11: two truck bombs decimated busy districts of the capital Mogadishu. Entire buildings and streets were severely damaged in the attack, thought to be the deadliest in Somalia’s recent memory. Al-Shabaab did not claim responsibility, but the Somali government put them at the scene. 512 people were killed, 312 wounded and 62 missing in the atrocity. And Al-Shabaab have not limited themselves to their base. I was conducting a field trip in Uganda in June 2010 with Canadian and other students and took them to an Ethiopian restaurant in Kampala for dinner one night. Several weeks later that restaurant was bombed by Al-Shabaab on the 11 July as well as a Rugby club (both venues were showing the FIFA world Cup Final). 74 people were killed and about 85 wounded in these attacks. Several years later they attacked Westgate Mall in Nairobi (September 21, 2013) and held siege for 4 days killing 168 and wounding 175. Two years later they attacked Garissa University College in Kenya killing non-Muslim students and resulting in 151 dead. These attacks showed that Al-Shabaab was willing to move outside its territory to other countries seen as a threat to their existence in Somalia and who would have been sending troops to combat terrorist activity.

These kinds of devastating attacks show that Al-Shabaab has not only the extreme ideology to carry out these atrocities but also the military organization. The weakness of the Somali state combined with their dedicated followers means it will be difficult to remove them. Quoting a Somali army colonel, the authors illustrate the problem, “They did not come from outer space.” He adds, “They are part of the society, a cancerous part, they reappear in wherever you clean them from” (Maruf and Joseph 2018: 281).



The lesson is that the jihadist groups are continually evolving in response to their changing circumstances. It's also an immensely readable account, reading at times like a thriller while maintaining the sobriety of analyzing a deadly and brutal organization designed to wreak havoc with any established political order and who have spread their influence to other countries in East Africa (like Kenya, for example). It also shows that terrorist organizations do not simply go away or are defeated. They may rise, fall, and go through a resurgence but they have had and will continue to have an effect beyond their numbers or strength. Like many of these jihadi groups the information on their origins and causes are sparse but Maruf and Joseph have done a brilliant and courageous job of filling in the blanks tracing the evolution of the organization and explaining its rationale. The authors are not optimistic about how things will end with Al-Shabaab despite the fact that in recent years there has been somewhat of a decline in their activity and perhaps without real attention to the "ungoverned" spaces in which saw groups can flourish, they will continue in one form or another, hiding in the shadows and seeking opportunities to inflict damage.

### **CONCLUSION**

Analyzing the motivations, behavior and impact of jihadists and terrorist groups and the responses to them has never been an easy task. The different authors here however have managed to go beyond the casual analyses which have somewhat limited writings of this genre in the past. There is an enormous amount of substantive theory, content and empirical evidence here painstakingly put together to reveal the inner workings of ISIS, Al-Shabaab and other terrorist organizations and how the state has responded to them. In an age where the role of networks, cyber-warfare and the implications of radicalization through the internet and other mediums has taken hold, this research is to be lauded and will hopefully provide useful tools and instruments for policymakers and analysts dealing with such actors in order to gain understanding, but also to prevent terrorist action from having such devastating impacts as we have witnessed in the post-Cold War period.

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