

Beyond Terror

Beyond Terror: the truth about the real threats to our world

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There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) that on a quiet news day, an Irish newspaper plastered its billboards with: 'No News of the Pope'. Sales rocketed but when readers opened their papers they were surprised to find that there was, indeed, no mention of the Pontiff.

The publishers of *Beyond Terror* seem to have acted in the same spirit. This book is not primarily about terrorism, although there are plenty of references to it. The significance of the title is that there are other threats to human security that are more important than international terrorism and we should be focussing on these, rather than the so-called 'war on terror'. Specifically, these more important threats are climate change, competition over resources, marginalisation of the majority world and global militarisation. The bulk of this slim volume (120 pages) is devoted to chapters on each of these topics. The two final chapters revolve around the theme 'what is to be done?' and the answer that is given to this question is clear. You should join your local green party or peace activist group (contact details supplied in a substantial final section).

Notwithstanding its name, the 'Oxford Research Group' is not presenting a balanced, academic assessment of global threats. Rather, it offers a particular political agenda with a call to action. In the light of this, the sub-title of the book ('The truth about the real threats to our world') is deeply ironic. It is not the truth; it is, at best, a partial truth, contrived to achieve a political end. If this were not plain enough by the tenor of earlier discussions in the book, the purpose is made explicit in the chapter on global militarisation. Here the authors report on what they see as a very desirable campaign to force the United States to withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe. They go on:

These initiatives may flounder if there is not massive public pressure on politicians and diplomats. Everyone can support individuals and organisations pushing for these vital steps.

In *Beyond Terror* readers are not invited to make up their minds on difficult and highly-contestable issues. They are, instead, urged to the barricades.

The Oxford Group authors supply several arguments in support of their contention that we should concern ourselves more with their other issues and less with the war on terror. The first of these is that the human consequences are more serious in terms of the number of deaths that may be attributable to them. Some of this is speculative, as when the UK's 'Chief Scientific Adviser' is cited as suggesting that, in the years ahead, the world may experience more deaths from hunger due to climate change than from terrorism. In other cases the data is more specific, with WHO sources blaming human-induced climate change for the deaths of 'at least 150,000 people per year'. Similar human consequences are adduced for resource conflict and HIV/aids (a

consequence of ‘marginalisation’). Likely deaths in each case are compared with the apparently much smaller number of deaths due to terrorism.

There are a number of questions that need to be asked about all this data and, regrettably, none of them are asked in *Beyond Terror*. Generally, we might ask how robust all these figures are, and whether it may not be a little misleading to compare estimations of future losses from say climate change with historical data on terrorist deaths. It is also noteworthy that in another publication from the Oxford Group, which appeared at about the same time (and included some of the same authors) they say of (nuclear) terrorism that ‘*mass casualty attacks ... will probably become more common as time passes*’. No specific figures are given in this case but the clear impression is given that this is a major security problem and that large numbers of deaths may be expected. So large, in fact, that it would justify the conclusion that the proposed British civilian nuclear power programme should not go ahead. But of course this argument has a different context. In this case the case to be made is not against terrorism but against another favourite target, nuclear power, and it demands a different data-set.

We might also ask whether the human consequences of climate change, resource conflict, marginalisation, etc., are comparable in the way that the authors compare them. To begin with, there is the matter of agency and intention. Terrorist acts are directly linked to their consequences. There is little room for doubt about the terrorists’ intentions, or about what actions could (in principle) be taken to prevent these consequences, even if (in practice) these actions are difficult in the conception and the execution.

In the case of (say) climate change, there is still some doubt about the extent of human ‘agency’ and, certainly, there is a lack of a corresponding intentional factor. There is also a multifarious range of contributing social and political factors, including a global ‘policy’ framework within which some of these factors are to be deliberately ignored. This includes the contribution to global warming of India and China and the other rapidly developing states. We have no clear handle on the agency in this case. Indeed, there may be grounds to argue that, whatever may be the truth about the extent and causation of climate change, actually nothing will be done beyond the efforts of individual states to mitigate the consequences for themselves as far as they can. Taking action to deal with terrorism, simply cannot be compared with tackling climate change or (to take another problem the authors raise) dealing with the global problem of Aids.

As far as the relative importance of the ‘war on terror’ is concerned, it might be argued that the first duty of any government is to attend to the security of its citizens. In this respect, the proper criterion for how much money should be spent is not some notion of relativity with a range of other good causes but simply what *needs* to be spent to get the job done. It might be added also that a secure environment is the most important prerequisite for progress on a whole spectrum of social needs (health, housing, education, representative government) and insofar as *Beyond Terror* diminishes the significance of this, it undermines its own ostensible purpose.

Beyond Terror raises a couple of other familiar arguments that should be commented on here. The first of these is the old chestnut that somehow international terrorism may be dealt with effectively by addressing its ‘causes’. The problem is that there are so many causes, of so many different kinds and which are so inconsistent with one another, that they cannot ever be reconciled or eliminated. To suggest that terrorism

may be dealt with by addressing causes is to imply that terrorism is a legitimate tactic or response and is thus to encourage or justify it. Gandhi ('Poverty is the worst form of violence', cited on page 39) is a bad guide here. Poverty is a persistent global problem but it isn't a form of violence. To use the word in this way (as is frequently done) is to *justify* violence. Moreover, the use of violence is not in the general interest of the poor. There are an enormous number of impoverished persons in contemporary Iraq. The biggest block to remedying that situation is the continuing high levels of (mainly terrorist) violence.

It is no part of the purpose of this reviewer to suggest that the many global problems that the authors of *Beyond Terror* identify are not as important as those authors say they are. But it is to suggest that the proffered data need to be approached with a degree of circumspection and a recognition that there is a particular agenda at work here and that Bush, Blair, Howard, Merkel and Putin (all of whom are cited disparagingly on page 5) may not be entirely wrong in their judgement that international terrorism presents a 'clear and present' danger to the world.

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